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VANESSA



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# VANESSA

BY THE

AUTHOR OF 'THOMASINA' 'DOROTHY'

&c.

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'This weak impress of love is as a figure  
Trenched in ice, which with an hour's heat  
Dissolves to water and doth lose its form.  
A little time will melt her frozen thoughts,  
And worthless Valentine shall be forgot'

*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*

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# VANESSA.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE CHRYSALIS.

ALLERTON is one of the small, sleepy little towns which drag on an unprosperous existence in the rural districts of southern England. It can boast of a weekly market, and contains a decadent grammar school and a County Bank, and in the High Street are substantial houses with stone facings, which recall the days of its earlier grandeur, when the Hunt Ball was held at the 'Red Lion,' and was an era in the lives of the county gentry, and when two mail-coaches changed horses daily at the entrance of the inn-yard, which is now only tenanted by two shabby flies and a four-

wheeled trap. Those palmy days are long since gone by, and the rising generation of Allerton is too far removed from them to hanker after the past, however much some of its more aspiring spirits may chafe against the sordid round of cares, the petty *tracasseries*, and local interests among which their lot is cast.

Some such dissatisfaction may have filled the hearts of the two sisters who sat at work in a small and poorly furnished room of a house in one of the back streets of Allerton, although it was not likely to take precisely the same form in each case, since they were as dissimilar in disposition as in appearance. Amy, the elder of the two, with her oval face, delicately cut lips, and fair hair and skin, might have served as a model for the Madonnas of Raphael's early style; while Helen, with an olive-brown complexion, a low and broad forehead, shaded by heavy masses of dark hair,

not too smoothly braided, and with a figure angular and unformed, as it is apt to be at the age of sixteen, could only claim possibilities of beauty which were as yet undeveloped. Both girls were busily at work, Helen stitching seams in the sewing-machine, while Amy applied herself to the discouraging task of mending the finger-tops of a well-worn pair of kid gloves ; and when all was done she dipped a feather in ink, and smeared it over the trace of stitches.

‘There !’ she said, with a sigh which expressed as much discontent as satisfaction ; ‘that wearisome business is done ; and when I have worn the gloves for one Sunday, I suppose that it will be all to do again.’

Helen looked up, stopping the click of the machine for a moment to reply : ‘I hope that the game is worth the candle, Amy. I met Dennis in the street yesterday, who was looking forward as usual to Sunday



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no cuffs on, and Sarah is still less presentable on a Saturday afternoon.'

Although Helen might have appreciated some respite from her work, she acquiesced in this division of labour, and Amy repaired to the kitchen, where she prepared the tea-tray with the neatness and refinement which she so well understood, and caused Sarah, the general servant, to carry it upstairs for her, dismissing her again to the lower regions before she opened the door of the room in which Mrs. Mertoun sat with her wealthy brother-in-law.

Amy's colour was just heightened by the exertion, and her drooping eyelids were prettily expressive of a desire to deprecate her intrusion; but her entrance was evidently not unwelcome to her uncle, whose rugged features were softened by a smile as he addressed her. 'We have been talking of you, Amy, and I do not know whether you or the tea is most

welcome. Talking is dry work, when people do not agree.'

'I hope that we shall agree,' said Mrs. Mertoun, with nervous timidity of manner; 'the suggestion has taken me by surprise, and I could not accept it without talking the matter over with Henry.'

'And why with Henry, a lad of twenty-one, hardly two years older than Amy herself, who has the best right to be consulted?'

'He is but young, certainly,' said Mrs. Mertoun; 'but he is the bread-winner of the family, and so good and steady, that I cannot help putting him in my dear husband's place.'

'Do you wish me to go away, mamma?'

said Amy, with so evident an inclination to linger that her mother wanted resolution to dismiss her. She took up a piece of fancy work, and while her fingers were busily employed, she fixed her eyes anxiously on her uncle, and said, 'How is Eva, Uncle Richard?'



‘She is well ; that is—no, she is far from well—languid and full of fancies ; and the doctors tell me to humour her, as if I were not at all times ready to do it. The reigning whim now is that she leads too lonely a life, and that if you were her companion, she should never be out of spirits. What should you think of it ? Your mother would have one mouth less to feed, and indeed would be saved expenses in other ways, for of course I should give you an allowance.’

‘If dear mamma can spare me, I should be very happy at Leasowes,’ said Amy. It was prettily said, and yet the mother felt as if the honest bluntness with which Helen might have disclaimed the possibility of leaving her home would have been more grateful to her.

‘Of course she can spare you,’ said Mr. Mertoun : ‘she would have to do without you if you made a good marriage, of which by the

by there is more chance at Leasowes than here. However, I am not going to press as if the favour were all on your side. I can only say that most girls would jump at such an offer.'

'And Amy, as you see, is not unwilling to accept it,' said Mrs. Mertoun. 'You must not think that I take an unreasonable time for consideration, if I defer my final answer for a day. I will write by to-morrow's post.'

'And if the answer is such as I have a right to expect, I will send the carriage for Amy early in next week. Eva dislikes any delay when she has set her heart on a thing, and I left her planning the arrangements for Amy's room, which, she says, must be next to her own.'

'Give Eva my very best love,' said Amy; and though Mr. Mertoun protested with a contemptuous grunt that he was never meant to be the bearer of affectionate messages, he

was unlikely to forget anything which might afford a moment's pleasure to his delicate and fanciful child.

Amy anxiously awaited her mother's decision when Mr. Mertoun was gone, but, as she knew by experience, the necessity for action was ever retarded by a nervous sense of responsibility. Mrs. Mertoun was endowed with the ivy-like nature which clings with tenacity to the first object that offers a firm support, and although it was twelve years since her husband had closed a life of reckless improvidence in disgrace and ruin, she still deferred to his opinions real or imaginary, and hesitated to take any step of which he might have disapproved. Since Henry had attained to manhood, his strong sense was allowed to share the empire of his dead father, but he had imbibed many of the prejudices which had led to estrangement between the two branches of the Mertoun

family, and approved of her resolution to accept no pecuniary aid at the hands of the man whom she held to be responsible for his brother's ruin. Such aid had indeed been indirectly given, for when Henry declined the proposal that he should enter his uncle's office at Bixley, Richard Mertoun's interest procured for him a clerkship in the County Bank at Allerton.

Mrs. Mertoun was a graceful, lady-like woman, with great remains of beauty; and indeed it was an article of the family creed that few younger women could vie with her in personal attractions. Richard Mertoun disliked her as heartily as near connections, who do not happen to be congenial, are prone to dislike each other; but for the sake of his nephews and nieces he had always refused to quarrel with her. He came to Allerton at stated intervals, and the younger members of the family sometimes went to Leasowes,

from which Henry and Helen were too apt to return with prejudices confirmed against their rich relations, while Amy never missed the opportunity of cementing that friendship with Eva which now prompted a desire to secure her as a constant inmate.

‘I must say that Uncle Richard is right,’ said Amy, when she had waited in vain for her mother to enter on the subject: ‘it is unnecessary to appeal to Henry unless you do it to shelter your own dislike to the scheme. To me it seems the happiest escape from dependence, for I have looked forward to becoming a governess or companion now that Helen is old enough to be useful.’

‘Dependence on a near relation may be more galling than the same position among strangers,’ replied Mrs. Mertoun.

‘I do not think so, mamma. Uncle Richard is essentially kind to me, even when his manner is rough; and you, who have

scarcely seen Eva, can hardly imagine her gentle caressing ways. I am sure that I should be very happy at Leasowes.'

'Happier than at home, Amy?'

'We should only be ten miles apart,' said Amy, evading a more direct reply: 'we might often meet, and I should be no longer a burden upon Henry.'

'There is another reason why I hesitated to accept your uncle's offer,' said Mrs. Mertoun. 'I fancied that you would wish to consult Dennis O'Brien.'

'To consult him?' repeated Amy, with rising colour: 'indeed, mamma, you altogether misconstrue our relations. I deny that he has either the right or the inclination to control my actions. It would be affectation to deny that he admires me, and any warmer feeling has grown insensibly out of our boy and girl friendship; but he knows as well as I do that a formal engagement would

be hopeless and absurd ; and it may be for his happiness that we should have fewer opportunities of meeting.'

'Possibly ; and it is evident that yours will not be affected by the separation.'

'Indeed, mamma, I think it will be best for both,' said Amy, candidly : 'the consciousness that the eyes of Allerton are upon us, drawing inferences which the facts do not justify, destroys any pleasure in meeting him.'

'In such a case it may be better to part,' said Mrs. Mertoun ; 'but you must also make up your mind to see little of us all. There is no cordiality between Henry and his uncle, and he never willingly goes to Leasowes.'

'I shall try to break down the barrier,' said Amy ; 'and at all events I shall be able to come here, and to see more of you all than if I were a governess, perhaps a hundred miles away. You need not tell me that it is hard to be

dependent, but surely it is still harder to live on here from week to week and year to year with little occupation and no interest in life, except that of a round of sordid economies. You may think it despicable ; Helen I know despises me for hankering after material comforts ; but it seems to me that some command of money is the sum of human happiness.'

Mrs. Mertoun looked doubtful and distressed, but as Helen came in to condole with her mother on the length of her uncle Richard's visit, the subject was allowed to drop ; nor was it mentioned again until late in the evening, when the two girls had retired for the night. Mrs. Mertoun was left alone with her son Henry, and she knew how to interpret the pleading tenderness with which Amy bade her good night, so that she began, mother like, to urge the arguments in favour of accepting Richard Mertoun's proposal,



which she had been at some pains to combat when it was first made.

Henry Mertoun, whose features were marked by the thoughtful and mature gravity which is acquired by those on whom the burden of life has fallen early, listened attentively until the story was told. 'I hardly like the idea,' he said at last; 'you know that I did not like it for myself, and it was with your full concurrence that I refused a similar offer. But the position may suit Amy, who never seems quite congenial with the family atmosphere.'

'Poor child!' said Mrs. Mertoun; 'she is old enough to remember when the atmosphere was very different. She was her father's darling, and he thought that nothing was too good for her.'

'Twelve years of penury might efface the childish memory of those luxurious days, mother. But if the prospect of reviving them

in Uncle Richard's grand house will make amends for the loss of home sympathy, she is welcome to go.'

'It is only an experiment, and, if it fails, she can but come back again,' said Mrs. Mertoun.

'Not if she is to come back more fastidious and intolerant of our shifts of poverty than when she went: I do not think that would be well. Let it be clearly understood that if she casts in her lot with our rich relations, she must not complain of crumpled rose-leaves. She must not barter her birthright for a mess of pottage, and then expect the blessing of the first-born.'

Mrs. Mertoun looked wistfully at her son as she replied, 'If you compare Amy to Esau, Henry, the tone of your speech makes me think of Ishmael. Your hand is against every man.'

'Was it not you who taught me to dislike

and mistrust my Uncle Richard?' said Henry.

'It seems time to forget the old grudge,' said Mrs. Mertoun. 'If your Uncle Richard is conscious that he wronged your father, and wishes to make amends to his children, I too will try to forget the past. And I may tell Amy that you consent to her going?'

'If my consent is necessary. We shall miss her in many ways; and, as Helen said one day, when we were discussing the possibility of her marriage to O'Brien, "How horribly ungenteel you and I must become when Amy's refining presence is withdrawn."'

Thus the family consent was given to Amy's migration to her uncle's house; but she knew, in spite of her assertion to the contrary, that the matter could not be considered as settled until Dennis O'Brien had been taken into her confidence.

## CHAPTER II.

## THE METAMORPHOSIS.

HENRY MERTOUN and Dennis O'Brien were fellow-clerks at the county bank, and their intimacy dated from the day of Henry's first appearance there, some two years before. O'Brien, two years his senior, and already accustomed to the drudgery of the office, was kind to the shy, sensitive lad, and the friendship between them ripened as quickly as if they had been a pair of lovers. Their leisure hours, as well as those devoted to work, were spent together ; and since O'Brien lived alone in lodgings, it was natural that he should spend much of his time with the Mertoun household. He was soon at home with them all, the object of Mrs. Mertoun's

maternal solicitude, and learning to address the girls by their Christian names, while he claimed their services in mounting his entomological or botanical specimens as freely as if they had been his sisters.

Dennis was of Irish extraction, as his name denoted, and possessed many of the characteristics of his race. He was eager and enthusiastic, indoctrinating his associates with sentiments which were always emphatically underlined, and exacting unbounded sympathy in all his interests and pursuits. It need scarcely be added that when he divided the human race into two broadly defined classes of angels and demons, Henry Mertoun's beautiful sister did not rank among the demons.

There was, as Amy had said, no formal engagement between them, for how were two young people even to think of marriage without any more ample provision than the salary

of a junior clerk? But in the sweet summer twilight of May evenings, when they had listened to the singing of nightingales, and on balmy days in March as they wandered through the lanes together, plucked white violets from the banks, Amy's hand had been pressed to her lover's heart, and more soft and tender sayings had been exchanged between them than she now cared to remember. Of late, indeed, the joy of such idyllic pleasures had been marred, and Amy had drawn back, gently but resolutely, from the freedom of their intercourse. They no longer walked together, unless Henry or Helen were willing to accompany them, and Amy's smiles were rarer on the evenings which Dennis spent at their house than at other times. His courtship became more stormy as she grew more cautious, and she said, not without truth, that he was unreasonable and exacting. Still he went and came, and hoped that the cloud would pass

away, while Amy felt that the prospect of release from a situation of which she was weary was not her least potent motive for leaving her mother's house.

The Sunday dinner was scarcely over when Dennis O'Brien's figure flitted past the window, and in another moment he was in the entrance passage, waiting for no response to his knock to enter the parlour. 'It is a perfect spring day,' he said; 'all the insects must be abroad, and we ought to make great discoveries on the heath. I hoped to find you ready, Amy.'

'Helen doubts about going,' replied Amy.

'I was not speaking to Helen,' said Dennis, with a clouded brow; 'you promised to walk to Durdham Copse with me on the first fine Sunday.'

'Henry has made his own plans for the afternoon,' observed Helen, 'and I object to being a bad third.'

‘ You had better go, Helen ; you were scarcely out of the house last week, and you ought to have a walk,’ said Mrs. Mertoun.

‘ Then I must make Dick sacrifice himself,’ said Helen, seizing her younger brother by the ear. ‘ Dick, I appeal to you as a man and a brother to afford me the honour of your company.’

‘ I have got to grind my Greek Testament,’ said Dick, doggedly, and suppressing the more powerful attraction of spending a lawless afternoon in bird’s-nesting with his school-fellows.

‘ We will grind it together when we sit down to rest in the copse,’ said Helen.

‘ I am not going to let you carry the lexicon through the streets on Sunday afternoon,’ rejoined Dick, loftily. His imagination was not lively enough to conceive the possibility of carrying it himself.

‘ Most true, you slave to propriety ; but is



not Dennis as infallible an authority as the lexicon itself, and we can appeal to him in any difficulty. Be obliging for once, and you may be rewarded by falling heir to a duplicate specimen of beetle or butterfly. You know Dennis's luck and skill as a collector.'

The prospect of being shoved through his task at the least possible expense of mental labour prevailed with Dick, when it was coupled with this bait, and he graciously consented to accompany his sisters. Amy had awaited his decision with an air of placid indifference, but she and Helen lost no time in preparing for the walk, and since Dick was also dismissed to brush his jacket, Dennis was left alone with Mrs. Mertoun. He instantly turned upon her with a sort of bridled impatience.

'Is it by your orders, Mrs. Mertoun, that Amy refuses to walk with me?'

'She has not refused, Dennis. I have

never spoken to her on the subject, but I do not find fault with the instinct which leads her to shun the inference which our gossiping neighbours are so ready to draw.'

'An inference in which I glory,' replied Dennis; 'are we not all in all to each other? It is only for the few short hours of the week which I spend in Amy's company, that I can be said in any true sense to live: at other times I barely exist.'

Mrs. Mertoun replied by a constrained smile. O'Brien had never until now spoken out his heart so plainly, and before she had summoned resolution to daunt his enthusiasm by a single word of discouragement, the two girls re-entered the room, and the opportunity was lost. Helen understood her duties as a chaperon, and they walked side by side through the quiet streets of Allerton; but as soon as they turned into the grass fields which led to Durdham Copse, she and Dick fell

behind, and the lovers, if lovers they were to be, knew that their colloquy was to be undisturbed. Dennis made a motion to draw Amy's hand within his arm, and when she demurred, he said pleadingly, 'For this one afternoon, Amy, if never again.'

Amy blushed, while she suffered the hand which trembled a little to rest lightly on his grasp, and she asked herself whether Henry or her mother had prepared him for the communication which she had to make.

'I must have startled your mother just now,' resumed Dennis, who was himself too much agitated to observe her discomposure. 'If you had been out of the room for a moment longer, I should have gone headlong into a matter which I was resolved that you should be the first to know. I am not ungrateful to a position to which I owe my acquaintance with Henry and Henry's sister, but you know how I have always disliked the bank drudgery,

and I am perhaps absurdly elated at the prospect of being transferred to a more congenial atmosphere. Our common interest in beetles has brought me into friendly relations with Mr. Burdon, one of the bank managers, and I had the kindest letter from him last night, telling me that he was authorized by the other trustees to offer me the curatorship of the museum at Bixley. The immediate rise in salary is not great, but the start it gives me in the only career for which I am fitted would be worth a sacrifice of income. I shall be brought into communication with scientific men, many of whom have achieved distinction from equally obscure beginnings, and I need not now despair of attaining a position worthy even of you, Amy.' He paused, chilled by her silence, and looked anxiously into her face. Amy was, in fact, too much absorbed in the thought of her own new career to be

greatly affected by the intelligence, except from one point of view.

‘The museum at Bixley?’ she repeated. ‘How strange that you should be going there just now! My Uncle Richard’s house is close to Bixley, and it was decided yesterday that I should go to live with him, as companion to his only daughter.’

‘The Fates have ordained that we should not be separated,’ said Dennis, triumphantly; but Amy was able to put a different interpretation on the facts.

‘You do not know Uncle Richard, Dennis. He is a strange, cold man, with one soft place in his heart for his only child, and I am to be her slave and companion. The position will be a difficult one, and since our poverty has always been an offence in his eyes, I shall not venture to invite my acquaintance to his house.’

‘True, your acquaintance,’ repeated

Dennis, with some bitterness. 'I should decline to enter his doors if I am to be designated by so cold a term. But what if I come as your affianced lover?'

'It is better that we should understand each other,' said Amy; and the words were spoken with studied calmness even while the paleness of her lips betrayed the greatness of the effort. 'I have wished for an opportunity to declare my conviction that our present relations cannot continue. As boy and girl we have been happy together with no thought for the future, but now that we have each to make a real start in life, we must be fettered by no engagement.'

'I understand,' said Dennis, fixing his eyes on Amy with an expression of indignant scorn before which she quailed; 'we are to exercise the right of free choice in our separate spheres.' He paused for a reply, but Amy made no attempt to contradict the

interpretation he had put upon her words. 'And this,' he went on with increasing vehemence, 'this is the woman I have loved—with no thought of the future, I think you said—I have lived only for the hope of calling you my own, and of providing a shrine fit for the idol of my fancy.'

'I have spoken as much for your sake as for mine, Dennis.'

'You are considerate indeed,' replied O'Brien with cold irony, and Amy felt the impossibility of continuing the conversation. She dropped his arm, and waited for her brother and sister to come up with them.

'Have you found a specimen?' cried Dick, running forward; 'remember that you promised me the first Painted Lady of the season.'

'This is not *Vanessa Cardui*, but a new variety,' replied Dennis; 'a painted lady

which has just left the chrysalis and intends to soar above us earth worms.'

'Where is it? Let me see; have you let it go?' said Dick, surveying O'Brien's empty palm with a puzzled air.

'I have let it go,' repeated O'Brien quietly. Amy declared herself to be too tired to walk to Durdham Copse, and asked Helen to return home with her; nor has history recorded that the other two were successful in their entomological researches.



## CHAPTER III.

## THE MESS OF POTTAGE.

EARLY in the following week Mr. Mertoun's carriage was sent to Allerton for his niece. Eva, like the petted child she had always been, was eager to obtain possession of the toy she had coveted, and since the family finances allowed of no unnecessary outlay, Amy's preparations were soon made. The parting was over, and she leaned back in the carriage with a delightful sense of luxurious ease. As she was whirled past the Bank, she fancied that she could distinguish the head of Dennis O'Brien above the wire-blind, as he leaned over his desk, but such recognition scarcely dashed her pleasure. The cold estrangement with which they had parted

seemed to her the only possible solution of the difficulties which beset her path : if he had been importunate in his constancy, or passionate in upbraiding her fickleness, their chance encounters in the streets of Bixley must have been a source of embarrassment and annoyance, but as things were, she dismissed him from her mind with the reflection that when his unreasonable anger had subsided he would thank her for what she had done, and they might once more be friends.

In order to reach Leasowes, it was necessary to pass through the busy commercial town of Bixley, the town in which Richard Mertoun had amassed his fortune, and in which he owned a coal and timber wharf and some other thriving concerns. The place seemed like a metropolis to Amy, coming fresh from sleepy Allerton, and she noted the stir of life with interest, and acknowledged

the numerous marks of respect paid to Mr. Mertoun's carriage with peculiar satisfaction. Another mile's drive brought her to Leasowes, a square substantial house, with that air of being made to order which is apt to pervade the domain of a self-made man of wealth. The trim pleasure grounds, with their rare shrubs and brilliant flower-beds, the splendid conservatories, and the luxurious fittings of the house, were the pride of Bixley and an object of condescending admiration when presented to the notice of the more aristocratic county society.

Amy was abashed by the appearance of the two tall servants who came to the door to usher herself and her poor little portmanteau into the hall, but her position seemed to be assured by the affectionate warmth of Eva's greeting. 'My dearest Amy! what a long dull drive you must have had! I wished so much to go in the carriage, but papa said that

it would be too much for me. Bring tea this instant, John; or will you have lunch? We do not dine till seven, and it is only half-past three.'

'I want nothing now; I will have a cup of tea at your usual time,' said Amy.

'Bring tea at once,' repeated Eva with decision; 'is not my time yours? Come to my morning-room, where we can be as lazy and as comfortable as we please. I am not at home to any one this afternoon, John,' she added as they left the hall; and Amy felt that she was already installed as a dear and honoured inmate, not as the poor dependant on her uncle's bounty.

It was easy to see how the conditions of intimacy were to be fulfilled by the two cousins. Eva's overflowing affection had hitherto lacked an object on which to expend itself, for although her father worshipped her after his fashion, her caressing

kitten-like ways could meet with little response from a man absorbed in business cares, sparing of his words, and as rugged in nature as in feature. As Eva outgrew her childish passion for dolls, she had recourse to live creatures ; but the rarest of birds, the most unsightly of pugs, had failed to satisfy the cravings of her heart, and since the day, now nearly two years ago, when she first observed her cousin's budding beauty, she had been the object of her unswerving admiration. Another little episode, hereafter to be mentioned, had only increased her sense of loneliness, and her conviction that her cousin's stronger nature might supply the strength and sympathy to which she might cling ; and when the proposal that Amy should come to Leasowes was accepted, she felt that the obligation was all on her side.

There was no family likeness between the cousins. Eva was short and slightly made,

with great vivacity of movement, a colourless skin, and large, liquid eyes, which seemed to bespeak a soul too large for its fragile sheath. Amy, with her statuesque grace, perfectly modelled figure, and clear, porcelain complexion, reminded those who saw her of a figure in Dresden china: she was as beautiful, and almost as cold.

‘You must have had a trying day,’ said Eva, caressing Amy’s plump, white hand, ‘saying good-bye to all at home. Can Aunt Anne forgive me for wiling you away?’

‘She has Helen,’ said Amy, not without an uneasy consciousness that Helen’s niche in the family would be less easily filled.

‘True, she has Helen, but—may I say it?—that is not precisely the same thing. I have not seen Helen very often, and I think there is something antipathetic between us which I daresay we might get over if we were more together. With you it is

altogether different, although I remember that when you settled at Allerton two years ago, and papa said that we must ask you over, I made rather a grievance of it. I loved you when you came, and I have loved you ever since.' Further expression of her eager affection was checked by the appearance of the footman with the tea-tray, and Eva presently dismissed him with a packet of notes which were to be delivered that afternoon.

'Invitations to a dinner-party,' she explained to her cousin. 'I would not send them out until you had actually arrived. These great formal entertainments have always been a fatigue and oppression to me, but now that you are here to share the responsibility and talk over the guests with me, I fancy that I shall almost enjoy them.'

'You take my breath away,' said Amy. 'I have no dress in which to appear at a

regular dinner party. You know our straits of poverty well enough to excuse my shabby dress when we are alone together ; and by and by, if Uncle Richard fulfils his vague promise of giving me an allowance, I will try not to bring discredit on you. Meanwhile I must remain in the background.'

'No, indeed, Amy. I have not transplanted you from Allerton that you may live in obscurity. I am glad that papa's arrangements were vague, for then I may take my own measures to give them definite shape. No outlay pleases him so well as the money I spend at the Bixley shops, and we will go in the town to-morrow to order what is necessary—what I think necessary for you. When you have got your outfit, papa may please himself about your allowance.'

Amy faintly disclaimed the possibility of availing herself of such a munificent offer, but her scruples were easily overruled, and



the dolls of Eva's childhood had not submitted with more smiling complacency to be decked out in the silk and satin costumes which her lively fancy had devised for them.

Amy did not see her uncle until she came downstairs, dressed for dinner in the simple white dress which she no longer thought it necessary to husband for more important occasions. Eva's gay spirits and eager assurances that Amy was the gentlest, loveliest, and most loveable of human beings, procured for her a cordial reception from Mr. Mertoun ; he kissed her cheek, and hoped that she would be happy in her new home, since he was as ready to welcome another daughter as Eva was to adopt her as a sister. Amy could scarcely believe that this was the same Uncle Richard whose infrequent visits to the little house at Allerton were apt to bring constraint and gloom, and to cloud her mother's face with added care.

This feeling of surprise and gratitude was partly expressed by Amy when the hour of bed-time came, and the two girls sat together over the bright wood fire which Eva's solicitude for her comfort had caused to be kindled in her room. It was an unnecessary luxury on that mild May evening, and they left the window open that they might enjoy the singing of the nightingales. 'How kind Uncle Richard was to me! it was almost as if I had found my own dear father again,' said Amy; and the words were spoken out of the fulness of her heart.

'I fancy that he was thinking of Uncle Henry to-night,' said Eva, thoughtfully. 'I know that the estrangement often weighs upon his mind.'

'Do tell me about it, Eva; my mother will never go into details. I know of course the one terrible fact that distress and ruin followed, or perhaps caused my father's

death, but I have never been able to understand how Uncle Richard was connected with our misfortunes, nor why mamma has been so unwilling to be under any obligation to him.'

'Papa often speaks of it,' replied Eva; 'he thinks Aunt Anne unreasonable, but of course it is natural that she should still see the cause of quarrel with Uncle Henry's eyes. Our grandfather was a country surgeon in small practice, and his two sons had both to make their way in the world. Your father, who was the eldest, went into the surgery for a time, but he did not take to it, and then he was articled to an architect, and that did not do either. There was no money forthcoming to put papa out in the world, nor to give him a tolerable education, and he was glad to take a sort of errand-boy's place in Edgar's coal and timber-yard. He worked his way up into the office by steady application, and

when he had been ten years a clerk, he married his master's daughter, and old Mr. Edgar, who died soon afterwards, left everything to him when he died. Still papa says, and I think that he has a right to be proud of it, that he owes all his success in life to honest hard work, and not to any stroke of good luck. As soon as he was his own master, he tried to help Uncle Henry, who had never settled to anything, and was living on Aunt Anne's small portion. Papa made him manager of the coal-yard, with a sort of understanding that he should have a share in the business, but they could not get on together. There may have been faults on both sides, but he says that Uncle Henry was reckless and improvident, and would not keep accounts. At last there was a regular quarrel, and papa gave him money—5,000*l*. I believe it was—on condition that he should leave Bixley. Uncle Henry was very angry,

and said that his brother had broken faith with him ; however, he took the money and went away.'

' I can just remember leaving Bixley,' said Amy. ' I think I was five years old. We went to a villa at Twickenham, and lived in what seemed great luxury and splendour, when I contrast it with these later years.'

' It only lasted for two years,' replied Eva. ' Papa does not know how the money went, whether in speculation, or if he only lived upon his capital. At the end of that time Uncle Henry began to write to him for help—almost threatening letters he said they were—opening up the old question of the partnership. Papa took no notice for some time, and at last returned all the letters in a blank envelope. He blames himself for this now, since it may have driven Uncle Henry to desperation. Two days afterwards, he received a letter to tell him of his sudden

death, and summoning him to attend the inquest.'

'I remember his coming to Twickenham,' said Amy, shivering; 'there was an execution in the house, and men coming in to remove the body for the inquest. Mamma was almost beside herself with the shock of his death and the knowledge of our certain ruin, and we children were huddled together, and hunted from room to room. People talk of the happiness of youth, but I think that from that day to this our lives have been a protracted misery.'

'We ought not to have revived these sad memories,' said Eva, 'only I wished you to know how it was with papa, that you might not begin with a prejudice against him. Aunt Anne and Henry have refused his help in so many ways, that he knows that they still nourish the old bitterness.'

'I know it; I always thought that Henry

was wrong-headed to refuse the offer of coming into his office, and Henry was angry with me for coming here, Eva.'

'I must be doubly dear to you if you have given up Henry for my sake,' said Eva, with a tender embrace. 'Now let us talk of something else, or you will be haunted by bad dreams in your first night at home. Let me see your hair, your beautiful golden hair, which wound its coils around my heart on the first day I ever saw you.'

'Silly child!' said Amy smiling, and not unwilling to let down the golden shower of glossy hair, soft and fine as floss silk, which rippled over her shoulders, and far below her waist. Eva toyed and trifled with its untold wealth, until smiles had chased every cloud from Amy's fair face, and her dreams that night were not of the haunting past, but of a bright future opening before her.

## CHAPTER IV.

‘FRESH FIELDS AND PASTURES NEW.’

THE two girls spent a long morning among the Bixley shops, and returned to a late luncheon, and to talk over purchases which had opened to Amy a delightful vista of the costumes appropriate to every variety of social gathering which were to take the place of the thin and much-enduring silk dress that was familiar to all the inhabitants of Allerton. They were still in the dining-room when Eva was informed of the arrival of a visitor.

‘Leave the parcels here ; John will tell Julia to take them to your room,’ said Eva, as Amy was about to retreat upstairs. ‘I see a good deal of Lady Cecilia Wray, and should like you to know her ; and besides if I intro-



duce you to her now, there will be one stranger less at our dinner-party, for she is to be one of the guests. Never mind about your hair; it is much smoother than mine.' And Eva cut short further remonstrance by slipping her hand within her cousin's arm, as she opened the door into the drawing-room.

Lady Cecilia Wray, a fair full-blown lady of forty or thereabouts, greeted Eva with the utmost effusion. 'My dear Eva! I am ashamed to call so early, but I wished to catch you before you went out. Of course you know that Mr. Wray and I are charmed to accept your invitation to dinner, and I venture to ask whether your table is full, or if we may bring Lord Alan Rae. You remember my nephew, who spent six weeks with us last summer; he is coming on Tuesday, and I should not like to leave him on the very first evening.'

'I am sure that it will give papa great

pleasure to see Lord Alan Rae,’ said Eva, as soon as Lady Cecilia’s profuse explanations admitted of a reply, ‘now I want to introduce another Miss Mertoun to you—my cousin Amy, who has come to live with me.’

Lady Cecilia received Amy with all politeness, but her overflowing cordiality was still reserved for Eva. ‘Any addition to our little circle is welcome, and I hope my dear Eva, that you will say the same as far as my nephew is concerned, or have you quite forgotten Alan?’

‘I have not forgotten him,’ said Eva, with a slight degree of agitation which did not escape her cousin’s notice; ‘I did not know that he was expected at the Hollies.’

‘He has been at home all the winter,’ said Lady Cecilia; ‘a sad home it is for him, poor fellow, now that my brother’s health is failing, and poor Macrae, the eldest son, is in a melancholy state. His head was affected

by some accident he had as a boy, and I fear that his mind is incurably weakened. Lady Raeburn writes that Alan's happy temper has cheered them all, but they feel that he really needs some relaxation, and now that he is coming south, I daresay that he will stay until the grouse shooting begins. I should like to show you Alan's letter, but I am afraid that I have left it at home. He says that it will give him such pleasure to renew his acquaintance with our neighbours here, since he has the happiest recollection of last summer's visit.'

'What a strange woman to go into all these family details,' remarked Amy, when Lady Cecilia had taken leave.

'It is Lady Cecilia's way,' replied Eva : 'and our plebeian natures are rather gratified by such condescending frankness. She imagines that the eyes of all the world are fixed on the noble house of Rae, and she

seldom goes through an evening without remarking that she has not forfeited her maiden name, although, as she belongs to one of the oldest Scotch families, and her husband is only a Berkshire squire, it is merely a coincidence in sound.’

‘She seems to be very fond of you, Eva.’

‘Rather too fond,’ rejoined Eva, with a little *moue* expressive of dissatisfaction : ‘she took me up vehemently when I came out a year ago, and I am always expecting her to let me down again with a run ; but as she is the great lady of Bixley and the neighbourhood, Papa is flattered, and it has been impossible to avoid the intimacy. She is really good-natured, and amusing for a limited time.’

‘And what is Lord Alan like ?’

‘How shall I tell you ? He is not like his aunt, nor like people in general. You will see him on Tuesday, and may judge for

yourself, and after all I know him very slightly.' But the blush which qualified this assertion was significant to Amy's eyes.

It appeared that even in a house of which the machinery was as well oiled as that of Leasowes, the giving of dinner-parties was attended by considerable anxiety and trouble. Eva's finer instincts recoiled from any ostentation of wealth, but she was obliged to defer to her father's will on this point, and to submit to him the *menu* of the dinner, with all its details of lighting and service, to satisfy him that all was arranged on one harmonious scale of costly splendour.

'I think there was a Roman Emperor who chose to dine on nightingales' tongues,' said Eva, as she sate down to her writing-table to order some delicacy from Covent Garden which was not yet in season : 'I consider that sort of thing barbaric and out of taste, and it vexes me that Papa does not see it in the

same light. If it is necessary to attract fine people by a display of expensive luxuries, in which they would not dream of indulging in their own houses, they had better not come at all. When I lunch with Lady Cecilia, she does not apologise for sitting down to two or three lukewarm slices off the servants' joint, but, if she comes here, Papa thinks that three or four entrées at a guinea each are indispensable.'

Amy assented softly, not caring to provoke an argument, but in her heart she was disposed to think that such palpable proofs of Mr. Mertoun's great wealth were not deserving of Eva's indignant protest.

The important evening arrived, and it seemed doubly important to Amy, since she was conscious of being perfectly well dressed for the first time in her life. The Wray party was not the first to arrive, and since Amy was already engaged in conversation

with Sir John Hawthorne, who was to take her in to dinner, they were seated at the table before she had leisure to make her observations. Lord Alan had taken Eva down and was now conversing with her, but without much animation. He was a tall, fair young man, as fair as Dennis O'Brien, but, as Amy had no hesitation in admitting, he was far more regularly handsome, although there was an unsettled, vacillating expression in his eyes, which might be accounted a defect. Lady Cecilia had taken entire possession of Mr. Mertoun, and he listened with a certain grim complacency to her extravagant commendation of everything which came under her notice, from the *pâtés aux homards* to the blaze of white azalea which filled the conservatory at the lower end of the room. 'And that *épergne*! I am sure that I trace Eva's dainty hand in its exquisite arrangement.'

‘No,’ said Mr. Mertoun, ‘I think that my niece must take credit for that. Is it not so, Amy?’

‘I helped Eva a little : she seemed tired this afternoon,’ said Amy.

‘She looks pale,’ remarked Lady Cecilia, glancing down the room. ‘I do not say ill, for that transparent pallor becomes her. But you must take care of her, Mr. Mertoun.’

‘The advice is scarcely needed, Lady Cecilia ; since she was an hour old she has been my first thought in the morning, and my last at night. Perhaps I have been over-anxious, and have fostered her natural delicacy.’


‘Nothing is more deceptive than the appearance of delicacy,’ observed Lady Cecilia ; ‘people tell me that I am the picture of health, and yet I scarcely know what it is to feel really well. You must not be *too* anxious about dear Eva, Mr. Mertoun ; let



her have plenty of fresh air and amusement, avoiding excitement and late hours. I want her to come over and spend a long day at 'the Hollies,—Eva and Miss Amy Mertoun,' she added with a polite afterthought; 'do say that you can spare them.'

'Settle it with Eva,' said Mr. Mertoun, 'I am always out between breakfast and dinner, and the girls can please themselves.'

Sir John here engaged Amy's attention, and 'the rest of the dialogue was lost to her. Amy was conscious that she contributed little to the general entertainment, for her secluded life had prevented her from acquiring the ease of good society, and Sir John's well-chosen topics languished and died, in spite of his unremitting efforts to prolong their existence. Amy felt discouraged and ashamed of her own stupidity, and had yet to learn that even dulness may be forgiven in a perfectly



beautiful woman. It was a knowledge which she acquired a little later.

There were other lady guests, but Lady Cecilia continued to be the central figure when they adjourned to the drawing-room. Eva sought in vain to distribute her attentions, for Lady Cecilia was resolved to talk to her, and to her only, and the rest of the party sat round to listen and be edified. ‘My dear little hostess,’ she said, ‘I must take a lesson from you in the art of dinner-giving. The only alloy to my pleasure in coming here to-night is the prospect of hearing Mr. Wray’s critical remarks on our homely fare and inferior appointments. I find it impossible to get a really good cook to stay with us in the country, but your *chef de cuisine* is worth a king’s ransom. And the blaze of colour in your conservatory surpasses anything I have seen at this time of year.’

‘You should reserve your compliments for Papa,’ said Eva, ‘such things are in his department, and I am only the little lay figure whom it pleases him to set up at the head of his household.’

‘Even as a lay figure you excel,’ said Lady Cecilia: ‘considering the absurd fashions which are now in vogue, it requires the courage of an artistic taste to dress your hair in that simple and becoming manner.’

This last and more direct attack was too much for Eva’s endurance. ‘Do please, Lady Cecilia,’ she said in a low voice, ‘leave my poor little person alone, and help me to bridge over this dull interval. Do you think that I may play something?’

Lady Cecilia first applauded the suggestion, and then the performance, and Eva gained so far by her move to the piano, that her irrepressible friend turned to Lady Hawthorne, and talked of instead of to her.

The gentlemen soon came in, and Lord Alan offered to relieve Amy of the task of turning over the leaves of her cousin’s music book. She retreated into the recess behind the piano, and was thus a silent listener to the dialogue which followed.

‘Play something else, Miss Mertoun,’ said Lord Alan as Eva struck the last chords of a passage which she had played with considerable taste and execution, ‘something noisy, under cover of which we can talk.’

‘Will this suit you?’ said Eva, beginning a fresh movement with a smile and a heightened colour.

‘Anything will suit me which does not draw off your attention. Music is a fine thing for promoting conversation; observe the fresh buzz of talk which has begun with your new piece.’

‘I know; of all social absurdities drawing-

room music is the most gratuitously absurd,' said Eva.

'Something may be said for it, as for other abuses,' replied Lord Alan; 'just now, for instance, it serves for a bulwark between us and the company at large. How dull we were at dinner!'

'I was tired, and yet I do not think that the dulness was altogether my fault,' said Eva.

'It was altogether mine, or shall I say my Aunt Cecilia's. Her exuberant energies absorb the vital forces of those with whom she comes in contact, leaving my spirit altogether arid; but under cover of your music the sponge is removed, and I am myself again. And how are *you*, Miss Mertoun? Life seems to go on here just as if I had never been away,—is it this summer or last? Try to enlighten my bewildered senses.'

‘We do not change much in Bixley, Lord Alan. In one respect there is a pleasant change, however ; I want to introduce you to my cousin Amy.’

The introduction was made, and Lord Alan seemed quite as willing to talk lively nonsense to one cousin as to the other. Amy showed no readiness in reply, but her diffident blushes gave a new charm to her beauty, and, when Lady Cecilia came to declare that she must order the carriage, since Mr. Wray disliked late hours, Eva, who had been playing rather plaintive airs while the other two talked together, was not sorry that the conference broke up. An early day was fixed for the girls to drive over to the Hollies, and when Lord Alan said that he should take care to make no other engagement for that day, the words were spoken to Amy.

‘A very successful evening,’ remarked

Mr. Mertoun, who lost no time in lighting his bed-room candle as soon as the last carriage had driven off; 'Lady Cecilia is a guest who always ensures enough of talk.'

'Enough, or too much,' remarked Eva, as she followed her cousin upstairs with lagging steps; 'I am so utterly tired, Amy, that I will not come to your room to-night, lest I should be tempted to linger. We can talk over our guests to-morrow.' When the morrow came, however, Eva did not seem to be more disposed to be communicative, at least so far as Lord Alan Rae was concerned.

## CHAPTER V.

## CRUMPLED ROSE-LEAVES.

AMY had not the pen of a ready writer, and although she wrote to her mother with dutiful regularity, the bold statement that she was very happy, and that Eva and her Uncle Richard were kindness itself, left a good deal to the imagination. Helen declared that she should have made better use of her opportunities, if she had had anything more exciting to record than the number of skirts and mantles which she had stitched in the machine for the local draper, by whom she was regularly supplied with work, or the scraps of classical learning which she acquired in helping her brother Richard to prepare his school lessons.



‘The rank and fashion of Allerton are provided with summer finery,’ Helen said one morning to her mother: ‘Mr. Benson (the draper before mentioned) says that he shall give me nothing else to do for a fortnight, when he must begin to think of the autumn fashions. I am going to indulge myself with a morning’s work over Mrs. Somerville’s physical geography. Did I tell you that Dennis lent me the book before he went away, promising to correct my notes from it, which I am to send by post. This makes me less dismally sure that all chance of my liberal education has departed with him.’

‘I wish that I could afford to give you the advantages you hanker after,’ said Mrs. Mertoun.

‘You need not wish it, mother,’ said Helen, brightly: ‘if I had been set up with the stock-in-trade of an accomplished young lady,

I should most likely have been as idle and desultory as my neighbours. Look at Dick, who has been in school for five hours a day since he was eight years old, and the only problem he cares to solve is how to distribute an ounce of thought through a pound of work. All the knowledge which I try to infuse falls off in beautiful round drops, like water off a duck's back, and I do really think that boys are stupider and more frivolous than girls, always excepting Dennis O'Brien. I wonder how Dennis is getting on at Bixley.'

'We shall hear next week : Henry intends to spend next Sunday with him,' said Mrs. Mertoun, and Helen took a lively interest in the intelligence.

'I am glad of that : we shall hear whether Dennis has encountered Amy, and what came of it, and I suppose that Henry will see Amy herself.'

'He will call at Leasowes, if his uncle

seems to wish it : I am going to write to Amy to-day,' said Mrs. Mertoun, who had in fact extorted Henry's unwilling consent to this measure : he said that his visit to Leasowes might be distasteful to Dennis and he disclaimed any desire to gratify his sister at the expense of his friend.

The return of post brought a budget from Leasowes. Richard Mertoun wrote to invite his nephew to join their Sunday dinner, and to bring his friend with him if he liked : Eva enclosed a note for Mrs. Mertoun, entreating her to allow Helen to accompany her brother to Bixley, that she might spend the Sunday with them, and take home a report of Amy's well-being, and there was also a letter from Amy herself to the same effect, which contained a token of sisterly affection in the form of a pair of double-button kid gloves.

'Only look !' said Helen, displaying the gift with a laugh of honest amusement ; 'this

little fact speaks volumes, and I interpret it thus. Amy means to say, Come if you like, but do not bring me to discredit by coming in thread gloves. If she had sent me the three and sixpence in stamps, she knows that I should have been sorely tempted to spend the money in muffins and sardines, that Dick might invite a friend to tea on Saturday evening.'

Even while Helen disclaimed the possibility of rising to the proper level of Leasowes gentility, it was evident that the prospect of such a break in her monotonous life was attractive, and the motive urged by Eva of bringing back a report of Amy weighed with Mrs. Mertoun. 'It is of no use trusting to Henry's account of her,' she said, 'a man never sees the things which we really care to know.'

'Besides,' added Henry, 'I shall not have much time to bestow on such researches.

My visit is to Dennis, and I certainly shall not desert him to dine at Leasowes.'

'You will call there, however,' said Mrs. Mertoun.

'Oh yes, I will call, and I think it is quite right that Helen should go there. Eva writes a nice, affectionate note, and, since there is no excuse to make, we ought not to vex her by declining the invitation.'

Thus then the matter was arranged, and on the following Saturday the brother and sister set out for Bixley. Mr. Mertoun's carriage was not sent for them in this instance, and they travelled second class by a circuitous route, yet Helen enjoyed the journey, and was especially pleased to find Dennis O'Brien waiting for them on the platform at Bixley. He greeted them warmly, but when Henry wondered whether Helen could find her own way to Leasowes, he said in a cold and constrained voice :

‘She will not have to do so; Mr. Mertoun’s carriage is waiting outside.’

They passed out of the gate, and there in fact was the light, open carriage, with Amy leaning back in it, looking prettier than ever in her light summer toilette. It was easy to understand why she had not gone on the platform; for when Dennis emerged from the doorway, and she leaned forward with an eager determination to be recognised, he looked straight before him and walked past the carriage, to stand some paces off while Henry greeted one sister and put the other into the carriage. He lost no time in rejoining his friend and they walked off, arm-in-arm, while the sisters were whirled on through the streets of Bixley.

‘Dennis O’Brien is really too childish and absurd,’ said Amy, quite startled out of her usual placidity of manner: ‘this is not the first time I have passed him in the carriage,

and he has always refused to see me. Two or three of our country neighbours have made his acquaintance, and it will be awkward and annoying to meet him at their houses while he is in this irrational humour.'

'Awkward indeed!' rejoined Helen, who was fuming with indignation at O'Brien's wrongs, but Amy was too much absorbed in the sense of her own injuries to notice to which side her sympathy was given.

'I must try to speak to Henry about it to-morrow,' she continued; 'he may be able to convince Dennis of the folly and injustice of placing me in this uncomfortable position.'


'I doubt whether you will get much satisfaction out of Henry. Do not let us talk of Dennis now, since it is a subject on which we can never agree. How nice you look, Amy! Is it all as pleasant as you intended it to be?'

'Even more pleasant. I cannot tell you

how kind Uncle Richard is to me, and Eva and I are like sisters together.'

'Perhaps the tie is closer than that of sisters in general,' said Helen, who had not got all the satisfaction she desired out of that relationship. 'Eva said the same thing in her letter to mother. It was good of her to ask me here, and I have come chiefly to please the mother who wants so much to hear of you, but it is an extravagance which may not be repeated, even if you keep me in kid gloves. Admire the shapely appearance of my hands! I began to work my fingers into the trammels of civilisation when I reached the Bixley junction, in order that I might display them to you in unsullied glory.'

Amy smiled at the thought that if Dennis O'Brien were destined to be the crumpled rose-leaf in her lot, any annoyance he might cause her was cheaply purchased by her immunity from such sordid economies. She





laid a disapproving finger on Helen's neck-tie, the only article of her dress, with the exception of the gloves aforesaid, which bore any appearance of newness, and asked, 'Where did you buy that gaudy thing? It goes very ill with your dress.'

'I did not buy it at all, Amy : it was an offering of esteem and regard from Mr. Benson, when I went about my last lot of work. I had an impression that it was rather vulgar, but as he assured me it was a sweet, genteel thing, I could not hurt his feelings by declining the gift.'

'At all events you might keep it for Allerton church ; you will not meet Mr. Benson here.'

'That is true,' said Helen, as she took off the obnoxious ribbon and slipped it into her pocket ; 'you see how amenable I am, but you must not be *too* critical of my manners and appearance, or I shall become still more

awkward than I am by nature. Is not this Swiss cottage which has broken out in chimnies the lodge to Leasowes? please put my bonnet straight while I compose myself into a becoming attitude of lady-like ease, and assume my very properest behaviour.'

Helen's bantering tone, combined with the discomposure excited by O'Brien's behaviour, had ruffled Amy's gentle temper, and when the two sisters entered the drawing-room they were constrained and ill at ease; so that Eva thought that the kindest thing she could do was to suggest that they should adjourn to Amy's room to finish their talk, and then join her on the lawn, to drink tea under the limes. They went upstairs accordingly, but the flow of talk was still languid and intermittent: Amy asked sweetly after her mother, displayed some tokens of Eva's lavish affection in the trinkets on her toilette table, listened with faint interest to one or two

items of Allerton news, and then betrayed the subject which still occupied her mind by the abrupt remark :


‘If Henry will not stir in the matter, Helen, perhaps you can speak to Dennis O’Brien.’

‘I do not suppose that I shall have the opportunity,’ replied Helen.

‘You will probably see him at the station when you go away on Monday, and I shall not be there, as Henry will be sure to take the early train.’

‘And if I do see him, what am I to say—that you made a mistake in casting him off and only want to be asked again?’

‘I call that extreme impertinence,’ said Amy with unwonted heat: ‘he has no right to cut me, because I decline to see him as my lover. I am far from wishing to renew our former intimacy, but he ought to be able to meet me on the terms of ordinary politeness.’



‘Cold-hearted people may be polite to those they have once loved, Amy, but it is not in Dennis’s nature to forget. Besides you announced your intention of cutting him, so at least he told Henry.’

‘Dennis took fire at once, and was too angry and unreasonable to understand my meaning. I did say that as we should live in such different sets we must not expect to meet, but as it happens we are likely to do so. Mr. Wray, who is a scientific man, and interested in the Museum, has taken a fancy to him, and I know that he is invited to a croquet at the Hollies this week. And if Lady Cecilia and Mr. Wray take him up, he will be asked everywhere.’

‘So you wish me to tell him to avoid such complications by keeping away. Perhaps you got Eva to ask me to Leasowes on purpose to arrange your little difficulties?’

‘You take a perverse pleasure in mis-

- . understanding me, Helen. I can be shut out from no society to which Eva is admitted, but it will be very much to Dennis's disadvantage if the world is allowed to see that there is this absurd *tracasserie*.'

'For which, however, Dennis is not responsible. But if it is likely to do him any harm, I have no objection to try to set matters straight between you, although I warn you that you could not have chosen a worse go-between.' The concession, which was not graciously made, was really gratefully received, and Amy was glad to let the conversation drift from a subject on which the sisters' views differed so widely.

'You like a romance, Helen, and may be introduced to one in real life to-morrow. Since Eva has not said a word to me on the subject, it is no breach of confidence to tell you that I am nearly sure that she feels a certain interest in Lord Alan Rae, and one

of her friends told me that he paid her great attention last summer. He is handsome and agreeable, and will one day be the Marquis of Raeburn, and as it is a poor peerage Eva's fortune will be very acceptable. Lady Cecilia's anxiety to bring about the match is only too apparent, and I believe that may hold Lord Alan back.'

'Do you call that a romance, Amy? I should call it a commercial transaction, since Eva's fortune is the equivalent for a peerage. Her noble lover will expect an extra ten thousand pounds if he discovers that another Miss Mertoun is journeywoman to the draper of Allerton.'

'Your habit of turning everything into ridicule is very unsatisfactory,' said Amy. 'I thought that you would be interested in what so nearly concerns Eva's happiness, for she is evidently very much attached to him.'

'I beg your pardon, and Eva's,' replied

Helen, 'but you said nothing about the attachment in the first instance, and I was so uplifted by the idea of being cousin to a live Marchioness that I could think of nothing else.'

'Tea is brought out on the lawn,' said Amy shortly, and neither of the girls were unwilling to rejoin Eva there. The sweet sights and sounds of the May afternoon exercised their due influence on Helen's cynical spirit and she flitted from the garden to the conservatory, amazing Eva by the quickness with which she named the species of rare flowers which she had never seen, or had seen only in illustrations, and she was still more astonished when Helen mentioned Dennis O'Brien as the authority for some of her botanical statements.

'Is that the same Mr. Dennis O'Brien who is the new curator of the Museum? I did not know that you were acquainted with him,' said Eva.

‘We have known him ever since we came to Allerton ; he is Henry’s greatest friend,’ replied Helen without pausing to consider how Amy was to account for her suppression of this fact.

‘Then I hope that Henry may bring him here to-morrow,’ said Eva, ‘Mr. Wray and Lord Alan both say that he is charming.’

‘He certainly will not come here,’ said Helen bluntly, and then, looking up with a sudden perception of Amy’s embarrassment, she wandered off into the conservatory, leaving her sister to explain the matter if she chose.

Eva, incapable of interpreting it to Amy’s disadvantage, was already prepared with an explanation. ‘I suppose that I must not guess, Amy, why Mr. O’Brien will not come here, nor why you said nothing of your previous acquaintance.’

‘I do not mind *your* surmises,’ said Amy,



relieved by the unsuspiciousness which acquitted her of any wilful insincerity, 'if the matter does not go further. Mr. O'Brien has not quite got over his disappointment, and I wish that our first meeting were over.'

'If it takes place at the Hollies next week, I will promise to look another way,' said Eva smiling, and Amy felt grateful to Helen for the incautious speech which had enabled her to represent the situation in such a satisfactory light.

## CHAPTER VI.


## THE BEETLE-HUNT.

HELEN found the evening at Leasowes long, and she believed that the Sunday which was to follow might be yet more tedious. She regarded the visit as a thing to be done, and to talk of afterwards ; but she doubted whether it would bear repetition, on other grounds besides those of economy. Intercourse with Amy could only bring home to her the fact that their lives were drifting further asunder, and her sister's complicated relations with Dennis O'Brien must continue to be a source of irritation. Nor could Helen look forward to the delivery of her sister's message to Dennis with any satisfaction, believing that he might resent her intervention as an im-

pertinence, so that on the whole she was disposed to wish herself back at Allerton.

When Sunday came, Helen found that she was to drive into Bixley for morning service, with her sister and cousin. She was too much dismayed by the critical glances which her uncle Richard darted at her from under his shaggy eyebrows to propose to walk with him; and it did not occur to the other two girls that she despised the advantage of coming into church cool and fresh, with a toilette unsullied by the dusty road-way.

The modern and unsightly parish church was situated in the heart of Bixley, and the Mertoun family occupied a spacious pew in the gallery conspicuous by its fittings and position, and commanding a view of the whole congregation. Even at Allerton Henry and O'Brien had been apt to stray in search of some rural church, and Helen did not therefore expect to see them in such an assembly



of middle-class respectability. There were, however, several of Eva's acquaintance with whom she exchanged greetings at the conclusion of the service ; and a tall, fair young man, whom Helen at once divined to be Lord Alan Rae, was waiting for them at the foot of the gallery stairs.

‘Yes, I walked in,’ he said, in reply to Eva's inquiries: ‘a Sunday with one's relations is apt to run to length, and I knew that I might depend on your giving me luncheon. It is the only day on which I can find Mr. Mertoun at home.’

Mr. Mertoun heard and was not insensible to the implied compliment, and urged Lord Alan to take the vacant place in the carriage.

‘Indeed Papa prefers walking : perhaps you would like to walk with him,’ said Eva, when Lord Alan appealed to her, and he took the place opposite to her in the carriage without further demur, a fact which had its

due significance in the eyes of the little world of Bixley. • The short drive was long enough to modify the democratic bias with which Helen was prepared to regard the first live lord with whom she had come in contact. His pleasant voice and manner might not have subdued her, but one little speech went straight to her heart.

‘ There is the Museum, in which I spent a most agreeable hour yesterday with the new curator—a great contrast to poor old Jenkins who used to potter over his curiosities with shaking hands, and if I asked a question out of the beaten track he only stared at me with his lack-lustre eyes. My uncle is delighted with this young O’Brien : he says that he is better informed than most men of twice his age and will certainly make a name for himself in the scientific world. And he is so modest and unassuming, really a thorough gentleman, and a little unwilling to be patron-

ized. Lady Cecilia is bent on securing him for her croquet on Wednesday, but he would not pledge himself to come.'

'I hope that I shall soon make his acquaintance, even if we do not meet at the Hollies,' said Eva; and Helen, who had been on the point of proclaiming her prior friendship, understood her cousin's guarded tone, and held her peace.

After luncheon, Mr. Mertoun retreated into his own room, to look over the miscellaneous correspondence which was not allowed to interfere with the more regular business of office hours, since it was reserved as an occupation for Sunday afternoons. The servant came in to know if the carriage would be wanted again, and Eva was not unwilling to be told that she looked tired, and had better not think of going to the afternoon service. They stepped out to sit in the verandah, and Amy was considering

the expediency of withdrawing herself and Helen to some other part of the lawn, when Henry Mertoun, who had just been ushered into the drawing-room, came out through the open window to join them. Eva would have sent for her father, but Henry interposed to prevent the summons.

‘Do not disturb my uncle now, Eva, as I intend to pay my visit later in the afternoon. I have only looked in to see whether Helen would like to join our walk. Dennis says,’ he continued, addressing his sister, ‘that he has found some famous hunting grounds for beetles, to which he wishes to introduce you.’

‘The very thing I was wishing for!’ exclaimed Helen, joyously starting to her feet: ‘I will run up to get ready, and will not keep you waiting half a minute, Henry.’ And her expeditious movements made the interval which Dennis O’Brien had been

forced to employ in pacing up and down outside the lodge gates as brief as possible.

‘That was the most heavenly idea of yours, Dennis,’ said Helen, with a renewed burst of exultation; ‘I am sure that I need not give Henry the credit of it; and I should have been stifled if I had been doomed to sit there all the afternoon and evening, with my company manners on.’

‘The suggestion was not wholly disinterested,’ replied O’Brien: ‘Mertoun has little toleration for what he profanely calls bug-hunting, and it is a pursuit which is much better carried on in partnership. This is quite a new range for beetles, although it is scarcely ten miles from our old haunts, and I hope that I shall at last be able to teach you the distinction between a *carabus* and a *cicindela*.’

And of *carabidæ* and *cicindelæ* the two young collectors continued to talk, with an



occasional excursion into the wider fields of physical science, until Henry protested against such barren disquisition, and demanded an account of Helen's proceedings at Leasowes.

'The life there is just what I imagined,' she replied: 'Eva is very gentle and nice, and Uncle Richard is certainly more agreeable in his own house, although still rather alarming.' And here Helen paused, unwilling to wound Dennis by filling in the family group with any account of Amy.

'Go on, Helen,' said Dennis, looking at her keenly: 'I am less thin-skinned than you imagine, and you will not hurt my feelings.'

'Then,' said Helen, who was ever rash of speech, 'I think I ought to tell you that you have hurt Amy's feelings. She cannot understand why you have cut her.'

'Is she so dull of comprehension? I am following her injunctions to the letter.'

'Then perhaps you have mistaken the

spirit. I am charged to tell you that you ought not to keep out of her way, nor refuse to recognize her as a former acquaintance. There,—I have delivered my message with Homeric accuracy, and do not want to hear any more of it. It is no affair of mine.'

Both the young men laughed, and it was evident that if disappointment still rankled in O'Brien's breast he was resolved that it should not crush him. His buoyancy of spirit was sustained by the success he had already achieved ; and he talked hopefully of the future, and of the encouragement given him by Mr. Wray. He spoke of Lord Alan with less enthusiasm, declaring him to be agreeable, but dilettante and superficial.

'You are ungrateful,' said Helen. 'I have met him at Leasowes, and he said many civil things of you.'

'It is the way of the family,' rejoined Dennis ; 'he brought his aunt to the Museum

last week ; a terrible woman, who asked fatuous questions, and talked fulsomely.'

' Lord Alan detected your dread of being patronized,' said Helen, 'and hoped that it would not prevent you from accepting Lady Cecilia's invitations. Her name is always coming to the surface at Leasowes, and I wanted to know what she is like.'

' She means to be good-natured, I really believe,' said Dennis, 'but she is as vulgar-minded as a lady of quality can be, and often is.'

' You talk as if you had a wide experience of the species,' remarked Henry, sardonically.'

' I admit that I was talking at large,' said O'Brien with a laugh : 'we democrats are too apt to fancy that we know things by intuition.'

' I think that you ought to accept her invitations, however,' continued Henry : 'it would not do to affront Mr. Wray, and

besides, there must be a certain relief in getting beyond the range of Bixley tea-parties.'

'When did you adopt the maxims of Mr. Worldly Wiseman, Henry?' said Dennis, good-humouredly: 'they have not been your own rule of action. Since I came here, I find that your uncle is in some sort the king of Bixley, and, from what you told me some time ago, I fancy that you had only to hold out your hand to become the heir apparent.'


'I do not regret my decision,' answered Henry: 'there were painful circumstances connected with our early life at Bixley which made my mother unwilling to return to it; and, although my foot is now on the lowest rung of the ladder, I may work my way up, as my uncle has done before me.'

'I wish that I could transplant you all here however. Do tell your mother how often I think of the happy evenings we have

passed together, and how happy I should still be in her house, although the glamour of the old days has departed.'

'Is not this a good beetle ground?' said Helen, with a wholesome desire to escape from such allusions. 'I am sure that rotten old stump is worth probing.' Dennis took out his knife, and while Henry disposed himself to the comfortable enjoyment of the 'Saturday Review,' with a pipe in his mouth and his back against a tree, his companions set to work to poke and probe, and burrow and potter, with an ardour which left no scope for any interest in life except beetles.

If Eva had witnessed this harmony of tastes, it would have confirmed the surmise which she imparted to Amy that afternoon. 'Do you know, Amy, that I am not quite so sorry for Mr. O'Brien as I was yesterday. When I saw how Helen's face lighted up at the prospect of walking with



him, it occurred to me that he might be induced to console himself.'

'With Helen? there can be nothing less likely,' said Amy, slightly injured by the suggestion: 'there is a sort of tutor and pupil bond between them, and Helen is much more of a schoolboy than a woman. At all events she is not the woman whom Dennis O'Brien will ever love.'


Amy's tone of positive assurance enabled her cousin's lively imagination to take a leap in a different direction, and she began to suspect that Amy's rejection of Mr. O'Brien had not been final. It was an inference which Eva was the more ready to draw, since her peace of mind had been disturbed that afternoon by a nameless fear lest Lord Alan's evident admiration for Amy's beauty might further unsettle his wavering allegiance to herself. He undoubtedly appeared less gratified than Amy had intended him to be

by her declaration that she must go into the house to write some letters, leaving him and Eva on the lawn.

Lord Alan's eyes followed her retreating figure and a sudden pang impelled Eva to ask, 'Do you admire my cousin's beauty as much as I do?'

'I suppose that every one must admire her. In her own style she is almost faultless,' said Lord Alan.

Eva faintly hoped that a less faultless style of beauty might win favour in his eyes, but Lord Alan did not make the most of his opportunities that afternoon. He observed that his five miles walk had made him lazy, and readily acquiesced in the suggestion that they might sit more comfortably indoors. If, however, he had been swayed by a desire for further contemplation of Amy's beauty, he was again baffled, since Amy had retreated to her own room, and was at that moment




in the enjoyment of the peaceful slumber which seemed to her the legitimate reward of Sunday morning's attendance at church—a slumber undisturbed by recollections of the lovers' walks among the lanes and flowery coppices, which had given a charm to bygone Sundays.

Lord Alan looked at his watch and observed that he had a long walk before him, and that he must get back to the Hollies in time to rest and cool before dinner. 'We shall meet on Wednesday at latest—sooner if I can devise an errand into Bixley,' he said as he took leave of Eva, and his smile, and the pressure of his hand, made her heart throb with pleasure which seemed to her ill-grounded when she was left alone to think over the matter. She knew how it was with herself, but the hunger of her heart after a solution of the old, old question was as yet unsatisfied—seemed at this moment further



from satisfaction than before. A year ago there had been no such questionings, and she had given away her heart without a doubt that her affection was requited. A girl of seventeen, still unused to attentions of which she had since received her full share, she had abandoned herself to a dream of happiness ; and when, after a few short weeks of intimacy, Lord Alan went away, and made no sign, she awoke from it to feel that she had been misled by a too susceptible vanity to misconstrue his transient admiration. Some secret tears had been shed, some bitter moments of shame and humiliation had been lived down, and she resolved to think of him no more ; but Lady Cecilia's influence had been exerted to keep the interest alive in her heart, and, when Lord Alan himself appeared once more on the scene, all her resolutions were scattered to the winds. She could not give him up while a hope remained, but she was determined to



be guarded, and to rely only on facts as proof of his sentiments, and the fact which at this moment stared her in the face was, that he had deliberately thrown away the opportunity of spending a precious hour alone with her.

When Amy came downstairs, refreshed by her nap and prepared to enjoy the afternoon cup of tea, she was too discreet to express any surprise at finding Eva alone. Mr. Mertoun also emerged from his den, and almost immediately afterwards Helen and her brother returned from their walk—Helen still radiant with pleasure, while her dusty and travel-worn appearance revealed traces of the afternoon's occupation, and her healthy appetite for the slices of brown bread and butter threatened to interfere with her enjoyment of the dinner which was to follow. Henry's manner insensibly assumed the stiff, reserved politeness which was apt to chill Mr. Mertoun's attempts to establish more friendly relations :

he repeated his refusal to stay to dinner ; and cut short his visit, on the plea that he and O'Brien were going to evening service.

‘ After all, I do not think the worse of the lad for being so stiff and independent,’ said Richard Mertoun when he was alone with his daughter. ‘ It is a fault on the right side at any rate, and he does not take after his father, who made a point of never doing anything for himself which he could get other people to do for him.’

Eva was more disposed to resent Henry’s determination to stand aloof, for she understood the strength of her father’s desire to see one of his own name succeed to the business which it had been the labour of his life to create, and it seemed to her a noble and legitimate ambition.

Since Henry was impracticable she resolved to indoctrinate Helen with her views, and they talked long and earnestly together that even-

ing. Helen was deeply interested in Eva's account of the circumstances connected with her father's death, of which she, as well as Amy, had remained in ignorance, and she was willing to accept the diplomatic mission with which she was charged.

## CHAPTER VII.

## CONFIDENCES.

HELEN returned home in high spirits, and with such a budget of lively gossip as seldom brightened the even tenor of her life at Allerton. Dennis's success in his new career, as well as Amy's entire satisfaction with her position, were subjects on which it was pleasant to enlarge; and they were almost equally gratifying to Mrs. Mertoun's motherly instincts, since she had adopted O'Brien as another son. Helen did not, however, think fit to unfold her mission from Eva until she was alone with her eldest brother. Mrs. Mertoun, as well as Dick, kept early hours, and when they had retired for the night, Henry was apt to give himself

up to hard reading, while Helen drew out a basket of undarned socks which would provide her with occupation for some time to come. Although she had a great talent for silence, she did not on this occasion scruple to interrupt her brother's studies.

‘I doubt whether Dick will do any more good at school, Henry. He has learned nothing for the last six months.’

‘I doubt it too,’ answered Henry; ‘it is of no use to pour more into a vessel than it will hold, and Dick’s vessel is of small capacity. But a boy of fifteen cannot earn a livelihood, and if I were to take him from school, he would only loaf about the streets.’

‘Eva suggested that he might make a start in Uncle Richard’s office; and I think the vocation might suit him, as he has a turn for figures, and a superficial smartness about outside things.’


‘Are you going over to the Bixley

faction?’ said Henry, looking up quickly; ‘why should I accept for Dick a position I declined for myself?’

‘Because you are of different fibre. There is no self-assertion about Dick, and, if he would be steady and take an interest in his work, I think that he would get on with Uncle Richard. If he went to Bixley we might consign him to Dennis, who would employ his leisure hours in the mounting of beetles and other innocent pastimes.’

‘You ride your hobby hard when you make a moral engine of bug-hunting,’ said Henry with a laugh which was readily echoed by his sister.

‘It is a fact, however, even when you put it in that insulting form. It is a grand resource to have a definite pursuit, and it has saved me from eating my heart out with vexation at the prospect of having to spend the best years of my life in stitching on



vulgar and fussy trimmings. I imagine that the handling of your neighbour's money must be nearly as disheartening an occupation, and you would be ever so much pleasanter, both to yourself and your family, if you were to take up a science. I have thought of suggesting chemistry, on which subject I am blankly ignorant.'

'Long may you remain so! If you begin to dabble in chemistry, you and Dick would infallibly blow us out of the house with hideous stinks.'

'You need not be uneasy. Botany and beetles will satisfy my aspirations for the next ten years, by which time I hope to be qualified to become professor at the female college of science which Dennis and I intend to establish in Utopia.'

'Ten years hence I predict that Dennis will have abandoned his Utopian schemes for a career of prosperous common sense. If



he goes on as he has begun at Bixley he will become the fashion, and marry a Duchess's daughter.'

'If he were to marry twenty Duchesses, he would never be disloyal to his old friends. However this is beside the question of Dick's future, and there is nothing Utopian in my project for his advancement in life.'

'Scheme as you please, Helen; but there is no need to make up our minds unless Uncle Richard makes a *bonâ fide* offer to take the boy into his office.'

'Eva says that the offer will not be made unless he is sure that it will be accepted. The fact is,' continued Helen, with the tendency to moralize which is apt to pervade conversation as we approach the small hours of the night, 'the fact is that the Mertouns are a thin-skinned family, and we must respect his little feelings as well as our own. Taken all together, I do not admire the

family peculiarities of hardness and touchiness which stamp the race. You and I know our own asperities only too well, and Dick is cased in a surly shell which it is very hard to penetrate.'

'Amy is soft enough,' said Ralph.

'On the outside ; she has the softness and bloom of a peach, but sooner or later you come down upon the hard stone with an unpleasant jar.'

'The stone being the organ which represents her heart ? I suppose that your resentment of O'Brien's wrongs has inspired the simile. Did Amy help you and Eva in the hatching of this plot ?'

'Eva suggested it to me when we were alone together,' replied Helen, 'and asked me to lay it before you and mother. I have begun with you because it worries her to hear us wrangling over any point at issue

after our amiable fashion, and she likes to be spared the burden of decision.'

'I think that he had better go,' said Henry, after a pause; 'it is absurd to raise objections when Amy is already one of the Bixley Mertouns, and, as you say, O'Brien will have his eye on the boy. I will talk to my mother about it to-morrow.' There was no want of filial duty in the tacit assumption that the matter was already decided, for Mrs. Mertoun, prematurely aged by a struggling life of anxieties and privations, had for some time resigned the reins to her grave, resolute son, who was ready to think as well as to act for her, and before whose living presence the shadowy authority of her dead husband must inevitably wane. Helen was satisfied with the success of her generalship, and felt some natural irritation when, after the plan had taken shape, and it was arranged that young Richard should enter his uncle's office when

the school broke up for the midsummer holidays, Amy took credit for the whole arrangement, and hoped that Henry would now admit that her migration to Leasowes had been prompted by a desire to promote the welfare of her family, and not for her own personal benefit.

The Leasowes household was meanwhile agitated by a discussion which bore no reference to Dick's future career. It was on the evening preceding the day of Lady Cecilia's croquet-party that Mr. Mertoun came home to dinner silent and preoccupied ; but he was so often immersed in the cares of business that the girls scarcely noticed his abstraction, and, when bed-time came, Amy went up alone, Eva lingering as she was apt to do for a few last words with her father. When she came upstairs, after a longer interval than usual, Amy did not observe that there was anything amiss until Eva

broke down in the attempt to reply to some trivial remark, and burst into a flood of tears.

‘What can I do for you, dearest? Only tell me what is the matter,’ said Amy, when the tenderest caresses failed to calm her cousin’s agitation.

‘It is nothing, nothing really: I was flurried by what Papa said,’ replied Eva at last.

Amy’s unromantic imagination instantly conjectured that some commercial disaster had involved her uncle in ruin, and she said breathlessly, ‘Must you also exchange riches for poverty?’

Eva almost smiled through her tears: ‘Oh no, Amy, it is not that. It may seem absurd to say so, but I hope that I should bear the loss of fortune with greater fortitude. I have been grateful to you, Amy, for saying nothing of Lord Alan, since I could not have borne it even from you. And now it is hard

to find that the gossips of Bixley have been making mischief by coupling our names together. The whole thing is a revelation to Papa, though I thought he might have guessed—'

'People will gossip,' said Amy, who could think of no more consolatory utterance than this truism, and it did in fact occur to her that she would have been less grievously disconcerted by any rumour which might credit her with a lordly lover.

'Papa means to be kind,' continued Eva with another shower of tears: 'he asked if there was any understanding between us, and when I said no, he said that it was the greatest relief to him.'

'But why?' asked Amy: 'he seemed pleased to see Lord Alan on Sunday.'

'Only, he says now, because he has a regard for Lady Cecilia and Mr. Wray, and wished to show every civility to their nephew.

Some one has been prejudicing him against Lord Alan, telling him that he has been wild and unsteady, and I know not what besides. But the most terrible thing is about the insanity in the family : he does not believe that Lord Macrae's imbecility is caused by an accident, and he thinks it probable that Lord Alan may have the same tendency.'

'Oh Eva!' exclaimed Amy, inexpressibly shocked, 'how can he say anything so cruel?'

'He does not intend to be cruel,' replied Eva: 'it is Papa's way to state facts plainly, and he did not, could not know how he was rending my heart. He wished to open my eyes before it was too late. But it is too late.'

'If he is attached to you,' said Amy hesitating, and Eva caught up the word.

'You may say "*if*," Amy. You cannot feel more doubtful than I do myself. A year ago I did not doubt, and since then I have

tried to forget words and looks which perhaps may have meant nothing. He is all the world to me, and I am not even sure that he cares for me a little.'

'He must care for you,' said Amy : ' Lady Cecilia's manner would be very different if he were not in earnest.'

'I do not doubt that Lady Cecilia is in earnest. She has said so much of the necessity of Lord Alan's marrying well that I cannot pretend to be in doubt as to her motive. And if he is in debt, as Papa says, he might be driven to make me an offer, but not because he loves me as I want to be loved.' And Eva hid her face, with a moan of plaintive despair. Since words of comfort failed, Amy tried to soothe her by gesture, laying her cool fingertips on her cousin's throbbing temples.

The contrast in their moods impelled Eva to speak again. 'How unlike we are, Amy. You will never dash yourself to pieces against



the bars of fate: you have the repose of strength, while I am weak and storm-tossed. You must not despise me because you know my secret, but help me to shield it from the knowledge of others. Papa says that we must go to this miserable party to-morrow, and that I must be guarded in my manner to Lord Alan, as there will be more gossip if I stay away.'

'I will help you all I can,' said Amy; and she prevailed on Eva to go to bed, and only left her when she declared, in the piteous tone of a child exhausted by a storm of passion, that she would rather be alone and in the dark. Amy went to her room, and sat up late, thinking over the unreasonable prejudices which induced Mr. Mertoun to thwart Eva's cherished hopes: she could see nothing in Lord Alan's gay and self-possessed manner to justify the fear of hereditary insanity, and she accepted Lady Cecilia's

adjustment of the scales when she balanced Lord Alan's noble birth against Eva's fortune. The combination of the two seemed to Amy to make up the sum of earthly happiness.

The morning brought some further explanation of Mr. Mertoun's views. The maid who brought Amy her hot water informed her that her master hoped that she would be able to speak a word with him before breakfast, and Amy dressed in haste and repaired to her uncle's study.

'Have you seen Eva this morning?' he inquired anxiously.

'Not this morning, Uncle Richard: I was with her last night.'

'I thought that I heard you both moving about late. Of course she told you what I said to her, since girls always like to talk over their love affairs, real or imaginary.'

'Yes, Uncle Richard,' said Amy timidly.

She was anxious to stand well with her uncle, without being disloyal to her friend.

‘And this affair I take to be imaginary,’ continued Richard Mertoun, bending his keen grey eyes on Amy with a searching glance. ‘I suppose that she told me all the truth, when she assured me that there was no engagement, nor even a tacit understanding between them.’

‘I think that Eva was most pained by the discovery that people were gossiping about her,’ said Amy : ‘she never mentioned Lord Alan to me until last night, and then she said that she did not believe that he really cared for her.’

‘She is so shrinking and sensitive,’ said Mr. Mertoun : ‘I have not been able to sleep all night for thinking how much I had wounded her, and yet it is evident that the warning was not given too soon. Nothing could induce me to let her marry into the Rae family : I know

from those who are well informed that there has been a taint in the blood for many generations, and that while the women do not turn out badly, the men are nearly all vicious or insane. This Lord Alan is agreeable enough in society, a gentleman, and with plenty to say for himself, but your fine young gentlemen do not always make the best husbands, and of course he is liable to break out like the rest. I hear that he is a little wild in his talk even now, especially after dinner.'

'Eva seems anxious to do all that you wish,' said Amy.

'She is a good child,' replied the father, tenderly: 'I still hope that I am more to her than any handsome young lord who may have tried to turn her head with a few soft sayings, without making any deep impression on her heart. Is it not so, Amy?'

'Indeed I hope so, Uncle Richard.'

'You are a sensible girl yourself,' resumed

Mr. Mertoun, encouraged by his niece's assent ; ' I rely upon your tact and judgment in any difficulties which may arise. It is clearly better for Eva to go to this party at the Hollies, or the tongues of our gossiping neighbours would wag faster than before ; and I would not go myself, even if I could spare the time, lest Eva should imagine that I dis-trusted and wished to watch her. You may be able to do more than I can to detach Lord Alan and ward off a declaration by which Eva would be unreasonably distressed. I do not enter into particulars, since you must be guided by circumstances as they arise.'


'Yes, Uncle Richard,' said Amy, a little perplexed by instructions which were of so vague a nature. How was she to aid in the process of 'detachment,' and had the slight tokens of Lord Alan's admiration for herself, which had sent a pang through Eva's bosom,

been noticed by other eyes? Amy had no leisure to solve this question at once, and could only resolve to follow her uncle's advice in one particular, and to be guided by circumstances.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## BUTTERFLY-HUNTING.

EVA and her cousin set out on their drive to the Hollies a little late, and yet not late enough to provoke any special comment by the tardiness of their arrival. The two girls were dressed alike, in rather fanciful Watteau costumes, which gave piquancy to Amy's beauty, and pointed her resemblance to a porcelain shepherdess ; but in Eva's case the effect was less successful : it may have been ill suited to her style of beauty, or only have been marred by her sad and anxious heart, but in any case the contrast between the cousins left all the advantage on Amy's side. It was Eva however whom Lady Cecilia welcomed with gracious distinction.



‘ My dear Eva ! as each carriage drew up, I trusted that it was yours. Alan was quite in despair at having to begin a game without you, as he said that you promised to be here early, and at last we arranged that Mr. Wray should hold your mallet.’

‘ Perhaps you will allow my cousin to play instead of me,’ said Eva : ‘ I have a headache which made me doubtful about coming at all, and I cannot do more than sit in the shade with you.’

Lady Cecilia could only assent, but when she took Amy across the turf to join the knot of players, she had a different arrangement to suggest : ‘ Eva Mertoun cannot play, Alan,’ she said in a low voice to her nephew, ‘ would you like to give up your mallet to her cousin ?’

‘ As Miss Amy Mertoun pleases,’ said Lord Alan politely, ‘ but I know that my uncle is dying to be released.’



While Amy protested that she would rather look on than interfere with the game, another of the players turned towards her. It was Dennis O'Brien, and, while Amy changed colour, he bowed with the distant coolness of a slight acquaintance.

‘How do you do, Miss Mertoun,’ he said quietly; ‘I need scarcely say that you do me no favour in taking my mallet. You know of old that I am no croquet player.’

There was nothing in the words to strike the ear of strangers, but they made Amy's heart beat with unruly vehemence which rendered her perfectly incapable of reply. She took the mallet from O'Brien's hand without a word, angry with her own want of presence of mind and with her former lover's stinging indifference, but a little consoled by Lord Alan's undisguised satisfaction in the arrangement which made Amy his partner in the game. Mr. Wray, who had only con-

sented to play on the understanding that he should give way to the first comer, was less gratified by the unceremonious haste with which Dennis escaped from his proposal to make a fresh transfer, and he took up his mallet again with an air of melancholy resignation, prepared to become once more the object of his young lady partner's withering scorn, as he frustrated all her policy by his blundering strokes. It was one of the occasions on which Mr. Wray was unable to free himself from the rôle assigned to him among many of his acquaintance, of being only Lady Cecilia's husband, although his individuality was fully recognized in the set of scientific men with whom he preferred to associate.

Amy could not at once respond with spirit to Lord Alan's efforts to interest her in the game. The meeting with Dennis had passed off well, and his guarded manner and cool politeness were exactly what she had herself

prescribed, but the readiness with which he had followed the prescription was not flattering to her self-esteem, and she felt that it was due to herself to evince equal indifference by replying to Lord Alan's soft sayings with a bewitching gentleness of manner which had its due effect in rivetting the chains in which her beauty had already begun to enthrall his fickle affections. Mr. Mertoun could scarcely have anticipated such prompt and efficient co-operation when he invoked her aid in the work of 'detachment,' and Eva watched the process with a sore and swelling heart. To Lady Cecilia also it appeared that her elaborately planned croquet-party would prove an unprofitable investment, and she flitted about in restless dissatisfaction, as impatient of the protracted game as Mr. Wray himself; and more deeply injured when Lord Alan and Amy disappeared at its conclusion down a

grass alley, from which they only emerged again late in the afternoon.

Lord Alan then came up to address Eva for the first time since her arrival : ' I hope that you are feeling better, Miss Mertoun ; I am so grieved to hear that you are suffering from headache. Your cousin missed a good deal of lively excitement in not being able to join our game,' he added, appealing to Amy.

' Amy plays a better game than I do,' said Eva, simply ; and it may have been only her cousin's uneasy conscience which detected any double meaning in the remark.

' She played remarkably well,' said Lord Alan, ' and we were both exhausted with our exertions, and glad to sit down and rest among the ferns. I think you know the place, Miss Mertoun ? '

' The fernery ? yes, I know it well,' replied Eva. She too had spent a long after-

noon in its refreshing shade, with Lord Alan by her side, just a year ago.

‘I am afraid that the tea and coffee are both cold : perhaps you would prefer an ice?’ said Lady Cecilia, turning stiffly to Amy.

‘Let me send for a cup of hot coffee, Miss Mertoun,’ said Lord Alan, eagerly bending forward : ‘it is my fault that we are so late. Unless, indeed, you prefer an ice?’

‘Indeed, I do,’ said Amy, looking prettier than ever through her diffident blushes, and it is not given to every woman to blush becomingly. But, as Lady Cecilia remarked to her friends, there was no soul in such pink and white prettiness. She was one of the large-bodied women who love to talk of the soul.

Eva had not been left entirely on Lady Cecilia’s hands that afternoon, for Dennis O’Brien was introduced to her and they had some talk together. His eyes, as well as Eva’s,

followed the croquet-players persistently, and a vague desire to ascertain the true nature of his relations to Amy prompted Eva's remark : ' I think, Mr. O'Brien, you knew my cousin at Allerton ? '

' I know them all,' said Dennis : ' Henry is my great friend, and our intimacy made me almost one of the family. I miss the home life in my lodgings at Bixley.'

' Helen said that they missed you at Allerton,' said Eva : ' what an odd, clever girl she is, quite unlike girls in general.'

' I am partly responsible for her singularity,' said Dennis : ' it has been pleasant to teach anyone of so much originality and power of research, yet I do not altogether plume myself on the result. She might distinguish herself as a man, but I doubt whether she will be a popular or agreeable woman.'

The critical tone of this remark convinced Eva that Helen was still, as Amy had said,

only a schoolboy in his eyes, and she ventured on the further observation : 'The two sisters are very unlike.'

'Unlike indeed,' said Dennis emphatically, 'and not only in externals. But I know them too well to discuss their peculiarities.'

It was at this juncture that Mr. Wray came up to congratulate himself on his tardy release from the servitude of croquet, which entitled him to carry off O'Brien to look over his collection of fossils, and Eva was left to discover that Lord Alan did not show the like eagerness to make amends for the time he had lost in the fulfilment of his social duties. She had honestly intended to satisfy her father by discouraging his attentions, but this could not diminish the bitterness of the admission that no discouragement was necessary. Eva was among the first to order her carriage, and when Lord Alan protested against such an early departure, his remonstrances were point-

edly addressed to Amy. It was to her also that the remark was made, that he should soon have occasion to go to Bixley and that he would take Leasowes on the way. Mr. Wray took Eva to the carriage and Lord Alan followed, not too closely, with Amy; indeed there were a few moments' delay, to be explained by the freshly gathered bunch of tea-roses which he left in Amy's lap after she was seated in the carriage.

They had passed through the lodge gates before silence was broken by either of the girls; and Eva leaned back in her corner of the carriage and closed her eyes, perhaps to keep back the tears which were ready to fall. At last Amy ventured to take her hand, and to say softly: 'Is your head very bad, dear Eva?'

'Not very bad, Amy, but a headache sometimes serves as a convenient excuse when one is out of heart or temper.' There



was another silence, and then Eva added :  
‘ If Papa had been here to-day, he would have been satisfied that the gossips of Bixley had mistaken the object of Lord Alan’s attentions. Is it not so, Amy ? ’

‘ Indeed, Eva, I could not help it. ’

‘ I suppose not. You can no more help being lovely and lovable than I can help being sought only for my father’s money. We shall not quarrel, even about this, Amy : to-morrow and for all days to come I mean to be reasonable. ’ Amy kissed her cousin, and wisely held her peace : it was in order to hide her own embarrassment that she played with the roses in her lap, whilst Eva, in the unreasoning anguish of a tortured heart, was ready to ascribe the unconscious action to her desire to flaunt such proofs of favour in the eyes of her slighted rival.

The other actor in this little drama did not escape a severer criticism. Lady Cecilia

had spent more money than she could afford on her garden party, regarding it as an investment of capital which was to produce a speedy return in the shape of her nephew's engagement to Eva Mertoun, and she was naturally indignant at the signal failure of all her schemes. When the last visitor had driven off, and Mr. Wray had retreated to the peaceful seclusion of his own room, for the half hour which still remained before dinner, Lord Alan discovered that he was not to be left to the same repose. He took up a newspaper, but Lady Cecilia was too angry and too much in earnest to be diverted from her object.

‘I know how much latitude young men allow themselves, Alan, but, even according to their lax code, I imagine that it is in bad taste to flirt with a pair of cousins who stand almost in the relation of sisters to each other.’

‘What an alarming prelude, Aunt Cecilia!’

Pray go on with your lecture,' said Alan, with a lazy good-humour which did not modify his aunt's displeasure.

'I really hoped, Alan, that you were in earnest this time, and that you would make a marriage in every way suitable and satisfactory.'

'The accusation takes a different form. I hold flirtation to be one of the pleasing preliminaries to marriage.'

'Always supposing that you flirt with the right person. You know, Alan, that I have given you every facility for making Eva Mertoun's acquaintance. She is a thoroughly nice lady-like girl, and the more you know the better you will like her. Last summer you paid her great attention, and now, just as all the neighbourhood is aware of the fact, you slight her in the most glaring manner for a girl whom you saw for the first time ten

days-ago. I should like to know what your intentions really are.'

'I thought that it was only the heavy father of genteel comedy who asked a man about his intentions,' said Lord Alan, suppressing a yawn. 'However, I have no objection to tell you that I *was* rather taken with your lovely young heiress a year ago. There was a naturalness and piquancy about her manner which I found refreshing, and, if she had come on instead of going off, and also if you had flaunted her money-bags less persistently in my face, I might have drifted into matrimony. But the fates are against it, the rich cousin has become sickly and spiritless, and the poor one is lovely and bewitching, and I have no "intentions," except that I intend my three months' visit here to be as agreeable as possible.'

'Your levity is incorrigible,' said Lady

Cecilia, and she pondered how the three months' visit could be curtailed. It was true that she had urged her nephew to come up from Scotland, and to stay at the Hollies until the grouse-shooting began ; but he had manifestly accepted the invitation on false pretences, if, instead of courting an heiress, he employed his time in an idle flirtation with her penniless cousin. She broke ground that evening by suggesting to Mr. Wray the expediency of leaving home for a time, but his reply was vague and discouraging. Since his conjugal felicity was not perfect, he preferred to remain at home where the presence of a third person blunted the edge of those sharp sayings which were apt to be exchanged in a domestic tête-à-tête. He said that he was writing a treatise, which made it impossible for him to separate from the contents of his library, but that if Lady Cecilia thought that she could afford it, she might take a run up to London, and he

and Alan would keep house together. Lady Cecilia deplored the selfish apathy of mankind, and was constrained to cast about for some other means of breaking off Lord Alan's unprofitable pursuit of Amy Mertoun.

The account of the garden party at the Hollies will scarcely be complete without the comment furnished by the following note from Dennis O'Brien :

'My dear Helen,

'Herewith I return your notes on Somerville, interlined with unsparing criticism, which I sum up in the advice that you should avoid tall English and study compression of style. Henry will be pleased to learn that I can also take advice, since I acted on his politic counsel to attend the aristocratic croquet. It gave me the opportunity of studying the instinct and habits of *Vanessa Cardui*, which are really interesting in a

scientific point of view. Perhaps this allusion will be more intelligible to you than it was to Dick, on the memorable Sunday afternoon when I was disillusioned.

‘Yours truly,

‘DENNIS O’BRIEN.’

## CHAPTER IX.

## 'THE LITTLE RIFT.'

LADY Cecilia's croquet served as a starting-point for other gaieties in the neighbourhood, and the hot June days which followed were occupied by a succession of garden parties. Eva was as reasonable as she had engaged to be. She accepted each invitation as it came without demur, although she knew that Lord Alan Rae must be among the invited guests, and was almost equally confident that he would distinguish Amy by his exclusive attention. Amy's passive manner seemed to endure, rather than to invite, his admiration ; and, except for one or two signs, known only to themselves, the affectionate relations between the cousins appeared to be unchanged.



There was a change, however, to be felt rather than described. They no longer lingered in each other's rooms at bed-time. There were no more whispered words, and the playful sayings, which bespeak perfect confidence, vanished before the smooth politeness which acts as the veneer of mutual constraint. Amy felt that her position was insecure, and that if at any time the strain on Eva's endurance became too severe, a word to her father might reveal the estrangement, and procure her exile from Leasowes and a return to the sordid round of cares at Allerton from which she had so recently escaped. Such a possibility struck upon her heart with a chill of dismay, and, since marriage offered the only certain escape from it, Amy could not rise to the pitch of heroism implied in any serious discouragement of Lord Alan's addresses. She told herself that, even if she forbore to snatch the prize, it would not be

more within Eva's grasp, since she had accepted her father's decision as irrevocable. That the prize itself might not be worth snatching, did not enter into her calculations.

Mr. Mertoun's objections to the match were ascribed by her to his characteristic reluctance to trust his daughter's happiness to any keeping but his own, and to the natural propensity of mankind to rake up frivolous accusations against those who are raised above the common herd by their rank or noble qualities. The fact still remained that Lord Alan was of noble birth, and Amy's craving for material enjoyment was gratified by the thought that she should enter a sphere where all was harmony and brightness. Besides, she liked Lord Alan for himself, though not perhaps with the same warmth with which she had once liked, or loved, Dennis O'Brien. That sentiment still lingered in her breast, and the gentle deference of Lord Alan's manner did

not even now awaken the same conflicting emotions which never failed to be aroused by the few cold and ceremonious words which Dennis exchanged with her when they chanced to meet. Amy considered that this was only due to the uneasy feeling of shame with which we ever look back to a dead folly, and that the grateful esteem and regard with which she was prepared to devote herself to Lord Alan's happiness were better calculated to outwear the union of a life-time.

While Amy thus arrayed the reasons in favour of accepting the offer of Lord Alan's hand, those who knew him most intimately doubted whether the offer would be ever made. His friends argued that, since Eva's wealth had failed to allure him into repairing the broken fortunes of his family by marriage, he was still less likely to be in earnest in his present suit ; and it was chiefly from a disinterested wish to spare Amy's peace of

mind, and possibly with the afterthought that her nephew might resume his more serious courtship of Eva if his relations with her were uncomplicated by this additional proof of inconstancy, that Lady Cecilia applied her energies to the task of diverting Lord Alan from his new pursuit. She had failed in her efforts to remove him from the neighbourhood ; but there was another mode of effecting her purpose, and it was with this object in view that she drove into Bixley one afternoon, and, calling at Mr. Mertoun's office, she sent in her card to inquire whether he was at leisure and would allow her to come up for a few minutes. But one answer could be given to such a message, and Mr. Mertoun, after the involuntary ejaculation, 'What does the woman want?' sent out a polite request to Lady Cecilia to walk upstairs. He received her stiffly, anticipating an appeal in

Lord Alan's favour, and her opening speech did not dissipate this belief.

'It is so good of you, Mr. Mertoun, to allow me to take you by storm in this way. I am really ashamed to trespass upon your valuable time, but the interest I take in your dear Eva must be my excuse.'

'Eva is infinitely obliged to you,' said Mr. Mertoun, drily.

'Once before,' resumed Lady Cecilia, blandly unconscious of his repelling manner, 'I ventured to call your attention to Eva's fragile looks. A woman's eye is quick to notice any signs of delicacy, and you will excuse my apparent officiousness in the case of a motherless girl.'

'Eva always looks delicate,' said Mr. Mertoun, disclaiming almost fiercely the secret anxiety by which he was constantly consumed, 'and the great heat we have had lately is trying to her.'

'Exactly so,' replied Lady Cecilia; 'our inland summers are always relaxing. At the sea-side it is different, and it occurred to me that a change of air is all that is needed to restore Eva's strength and tone. I know that it is difficult for you to leave home, but since she has her cousin's companionship, the two girls could go to some quiet sea-side place together.'

'It is not a bad suggestion,' said Mr. Mertoun, after pausing a moment to consider whether it could be prompted by any motive but that which lay on the surface. 'As you say, Amy might go with her, and I would run down for a Sunday; but since I have no partner, I cannot be away from my business for many days at a time.'

'I would gladly take Eva to the sea-side myself,' said Lady Cecilia, 'but Mr. Wray never likes to leave home; and besides, it would throw out my nephew's plans, since he

has arranged to stay with us for another six weeks.'

Lady Cecilia imparted this last piece of information in an ingenuous tone which disarmed all Mr. Mertoun's suspicions. In urging Eva's removal from the neighbourhood while Lord Alan continued to reside at the Hollies, she proved that she had relinquished any scheme she had entertained of promoting the intimacy, if indeed Mr. Mertoun had not wronged her in such a belief. His brow cleared, and he said with real friendliness, 'It is very good of you, Lady Cecilia, to take such an interest in my little girl. I am less at home than I could wish, and it is true that I might not be the first to notice any failure of health or spirits. I will talk over the matter with her and Amy when I go home this evening, and I will send them off to Swanage if I see any occasion for it.'

Lady Cecilia would not trespass any longer on Mr. Mertoun's valuable time, and took leave of him, satisfied that she had set the stone rolling and that her nephew would be deprived of the pastime in which he had chosen to employ the long summer days.

Eva's sad eyes brightened when her father came home prepared with his scheme for sending her from home. There is no treadmill more wearisome than the round of gaieties which demand a smile upon the lips when the spirits are flagging and the heart is sore ; and to escape from such servitude to the little watering-place, where she might be as silent and unsocial as she pleased, was a welcome prospect. But the 'little rift' which severed her from her cousin was slowly widening, and she could not endure the thought of constant and close companionship, when there would be no third person present to lessen the constraint. 'If you can get on



without us, papa,' she said, 'I really think that a month at Swanage would do me good, but it would be dull for Amy unless I may ask Helen to come with us. They might take long walks together when I am only fit to sit on the shore, and I should enjoy giving Helen the thorough rest and holiday. I know from Mr. O'Brien, even more than from what Amy has told me, how hard-worked she is at home.'

'Settle it as you like,' said Mr. Mertoun, not altogether pleased, 'I see that you are determined that I shall adopt the whole family. Here is young Richard coming into the office next week, and I suppose that you will soon find niches for the rest. I can see the attraction to a pretty, sensible girl like Amy, but this other sister has always appeared to me singularly deficient in outward graces.'

'She is at the awkward age,' said Eva, 'but there is something honest and down-

right in her, something on which I feel that I could fall back in any trouble.'

'And what trouble do you anticipate?' said Mr. Mertoun, looking at her keenly.

'Nothing very serious,' said Eva, smiling, 'but there are times when my head aches and my limbs tremble, and when the trouble of living seems almost too great.'

'A girl's nervous fancies; you certainly want change of air,' said Mr. Mertoun hurriedly. 'And you may take Helen if you like. A parcel of girls together: you will be apt to get into mischief, but I shall send Misbourne to look after you.' Misbourne was the old housekeeper who had ruled at Leasowes in Eva's childhood, and with whom Eva now shared a divided empire.

When Amy learned that the sentence had gone forth that they were to leave Leasowes for Swanage in the course of the ensuing week, her countenance expressed none of the

discomfiture she felt, but she ventured to ask in a slightly injured tone whether it were not rather early for the sea-side. 'At this time of year,' she said, 'I fancy that the place must be given up to nursery-maids and children.'

'Swanage is not a gay and fashionable place at any time of year,' said Eva. 'There is nothing so detestable as sea-side gaieties. The days may be too glaring for us to go out much, but I shall enjoy the long summer evenings on the shore, and the release from housekeeping cares, and the privilege of wearing shabby clothes. I hope that you will not dislike it very much.'

'Of course not, Eva, I think it will be delightful,' said Amy, not with enthusiasm. 'But if you can carry out your idea of taking Helen, would it not be well for me to stay and keep house for Uncle Richard? He will be very uncomfortable without you or

Misbourne to look after him, and I might be of some use to Dick in his first independent start in life, while it is near enough to Allerton to make Helen easy about leaving mamma.'

'The last will be only a sentimental advantage, unless you migrate to Allerton for the time I am away,' said Eva, with the slightest shade of *aigreur* in her tone. 'The distance is too great for constant intercourse, and you know that you have not been over once since you came to Leasowes. I am quite sure that Papa will not let you sacrifice yourself to his comfort, since I often leave him in this way, though not often so early in the year. He rather enjoys his bachelor life, and says that he gets through twice as much work as when I am at home. He dines out among the Bixley people, and once in a fortnight or so he runs down to spend a Sunday with me. He would be rather

oppressed if he felt himself responsible for your amusement.'

'I only wished to be of use. If it would bore Uncle Richard, of course I would much rather be with you,' said Amy. The suggestion of even a temporary return to Allerton, seemed to her sensitive imagination to imply a threat of her eternal exile from Leasowes and all its advantages, and nothing short of unconditional submission might save her from such a fate. She declared herself as ready to go to Swanage as to promote the scheme of adding Helen to her party, although there was in fact little in the note which she appended to Eva's letter on the subject, beyond an expression of self-gratulation over the benefits which the benign influence of her presence at Leasowes had procured for the other members of her family.

## CHAPTER X.

## HELEN'S HOLIDAY.

'O MY prophetic soul!' exclaimed Helen, as she ran her eye over the two letters which her mother handed to her without a word of comment: 'I always felt that Amy's promotion was only the thin end of the wedge. Dick has already been sucked into the vortex, and the rest of the family are commanded to follow.'

'A confusion of metaphors, Helen,' observed Henry, as he rose hastily from the breakfast-table; 'I shall be too late for the bank if I stay to protest that there is no legitimate connection between wedges and whirlpools. I only stay to declare that if Leasowes is the vortex, it will find me a tough morsel to swallow.'

‘I am glad that Henry could not stay to bias your decision,’ said Mrs. Mertoun, when the house-door had closed behind him ; ‘I have quite set my heart on your taking a real holiday for the first time in your life.’

‘Have you really, mother?’ replied Helen, stroking and fondling her mother’s hand with a rare burst of tenderness : ‘I never knew you to set your heart on anything so unnatural and absurd. Do you think that I am to leave you alone to vex your soul about Dick’s proceedings at Bixley, or Sarah’s last piece of stupidity in the kitchen ? I hope that Henry will get away for his holiday in three weeks’ time, and then you and I must look forward to our annual dissipation at the Manor Farm. I met Miss Charlton in the street two days ago, and she told me that she expected us to spend a long day with her as soon as the worry of the hay harvest was off her mind.’

‘I shall not feel lonely, with Miss Charlton to look in now and then,’ persisted Mrs. Mertoun : ‘there is really no valid reason for refusing Eva’s kindness.’

‘I see many reasons why we should not all become pensioners on Uncle Richard’s bounty,’ said Helen. ‘I do not want to unlearn the lesson of independence which has been the best fruit of our struggling life. You know, mother, that it will take me six weeks’ machine-work to balance my account with Mr. Benson for Dick’s new set of shirts.’

‘I daresay that Benson would let that stand over until you come back.’

‘I dare say he would; but if he had to get some one else to do his machine-work, I should lose my connection. You need not shock Amy’s gentility by bringing forward any such plebeian reasons, although I think the stitching of trimmings as little degrading as Uncle Richard’s dealings in coal, corn, and



timber; but write a polite refusal, full of the vague generalities which it is impossible to refute. I do not imagine that Eva really cares about my going, and if Amy had been in earnest about it, she would have testified to the fact by enclosing another pair of kid gloves.'

'If you are set against the plan, Helen, it is of no use to argue the point,' said Mrs. Mertoun, with a plaintive note in her voice.

'Do not worry yourself any more about it, mother,' rejoined Helen, brightly, 'you know in your heart that my going is out of the question; and I will write the letter of refusal myself, lest Eva should imagine that I am a victim.'

The letter was, however, postponed by Helen to the exigencies of her machine, although its composition occupied her mind while she bent over her work, which was carried on in the little back parlour, in order that she might be free from interruption.

Mrs. Mertoun meanwhile had a visit from the Miss Charlton of the Manor Farm, of whom mention has been made. The Charltons were substantial yeomen who had occupied their own land for many generations, and Charlton Manor was within a walk of Allerton. It was a picturesque old tenement, its brick walls and tiled roof mellowed by the interlacing growth of moss and lichens which had been undisturbed for centuries. There was a flagged pathway up to the front door, which was not opened once in six weeks, and a back entrance through the farm and poultry yard into the tiled kitchen, in which Miss Charlton pottered about of a morning, much more at home than she appeared to be in the low-browed parlour to which she used to adjourn to receive her afternoon visitors.

Miss Charlton was a little, brisk, old lady, who wore her own grey hair with her morning print dresses, and arrayed herself in a

brown front and a black silk gown, rich in quality, but short and scanty in quantity, when she went abroad or expected company at home. She kept house for her brother George, who was several years younger than herself, and had still an air of youth and comeliness about him. He was reputed to be wealthy, but their style of living was more in keeping with the customs of a bygone generation than with modern notions. They kept only two indoor servants, and would have thought it an unjustifiable extravagance to eat meat which had not been killed on the farm : but the consumption of beef and ale was great on all festive occasions, and George Charlton paid away a large sum in weekly wages to men whose chief claim to his service lay in the fact that they were too old or infirm to obtain work elsewhere, and that their fathers and grandfathers had worked on the estate before them.

Amy had always attempted to ignore the acquaintance of Miss Charlton and her brother, whom she designated as 'Helen's friends,' but she had not been insensible to the material advantages it offered in the frequent tokens of regard which were so often left at the door with Mr. Charlton's respectful compliments—the little loin of dairy-fed pork, the delicious cream cheeses, the fragrant strawberries or russet apples which followed in due succession. Since Amy's removal to Leasowes, intercourse with the inhabitants of the Manor Farm had been less restricted, and Miss Charlton was on sufficiently unceremonious terms to invade Helen's retreat, tapping lightly at the door when her long visit to Mrs. Mertoun came to an end. She received a cordial welcome: Helen kissed the old lady's cheek, which was at once withered and ruddy, like a shrivelled pippin; apologised, not unnecessarily, for her own

fluffy appearance, and tilted a pile of work out of the only spare chair, on which she entreated Miss Charlton to make herself comfortable.

‘Indeed, Miss Helen,’ she replied, ‘I have been here too long already. I sat gossiping with your dear mamma to cheer her up, for she looks nervous and low.’

‘Your visits always do her a world of good, Miss Charlton. She has a good many lonely hours, now that Amy is gone, and I cannot sit with her while I am at work because the noise of the machine worries her head. You bring a whiff of country air in with you which is almost as good for her as a visit to the Manor Farm.’

‘You have taken the word out of my mouth,’ said Miss Charlton, ‘for I have almost persuaded Mrs. Mertoun to pay us a visit. A month in the country, on our homely fare of good cream and whey and new-laid

eggs, will do her a world of good, and her only difficulty is about leaving you here.'

'That difficulty is easily solved,' said Helen, not unsuspicious of the attack to which Miss Charlton was diplomatically leading the way: 'Henry and I can keep house together with perfect comfort and propriety.'

'As if your dear mamma would consent to take her pleasure when you are as hard at work as ever. No, Miss Helen, I know her better than that.'

'Then, Miss Charlton, you must include me in the invitation to the Manor Farm, and let one of your waggons call for the sewing-machine.'

'Another time, my dear, another time. I am sure that I take it as a great compliment that you should think of putting up with our old-world ways. If Mr. Henry will condescend so far, there will be a bed for him whenever he likes to come out to the farm, but we cannot take all our visitors at once.'

‘Your duplicity amazes me,’ said Helen with mock solemnity. ‘Have I not played at hide and seek at the farm, through the long range of sloping attics, each furnished with its oaken press and bed with dimity hangings, where you might put up a regiment or a boarding-school? Confess that you and mother have been intriguing against me, and that this is only a plot for sending me to Swanage against my will.’

‘I am not at all ashamed to confess it,’ said Miss Charlton stoutly: ‘I soon found out that your mamma was fretting over the idea that you had given up the jaunt on her account, and I wish that you could have seen her face light up as soon as I saw my way out of the difficulty. Do not vex her and disappoint me by interfering with the arrangement I propose.’

‘Well, I will not—at least if Henry makes no objection to my going,’ said Helen, and there was some heroism in the concession,

since it implied the surrender of her independence: 'I must hear what Henry has to say in the matter, and also Mr. Benson, and if the Fates send me to Swanage, I will try to think it pleasant. But I know that it would be much pleasanter to drink cream and make hay at the Manor Farm.'

'Another time, my dear,' repeated Miss Charlton, mildly triumphant in the success of her mission. 'I am sure that George would be flattered to hear you say so, though he would not approve of your taste. He is a great admirer of your beautiful sister, and indeed it is quite a tender subject with him. I tell him that he does not care near so much about going into Allerton, now that there is no chance of meeting her in the street.'

Helen thought with some amusement of the scorn with which Amy would disclaim her bucolic admirer, but she was able to see the matter from Miss Charlton's point of view and to accept George Charlton's homage with



gratitude, and the simple-hearted old lady remarked to her brother that evening that, though some people said that the Mertouns held their heads too high, she should always declare Miss Helen had the sweetest manner of all the girls she knew.

Mrs. Mertoun was overjoyed, Henry only slightly contemptuous, when it appeared that Helen had reconsidered her determination to decline Eva's invitation, and it was accepted accordingly, with due, but by no means extravagant, expressions of gratitude. A few busy days of preparation followed, and, on the evening before her own departure, Helen had the satisfaction of seeing her mother and Henry comfortably established at the Manor Farm. Dick had already preceded her on the journey to Bixley, too well pleased with his new outfit of clothes and his release from school tasks to feel any aversion to the more monotonous drudgery of office life, to which

he must now devote himself. The house at Allerton was to be shut up, and, since it was many years since there had been so little strain on Mrs. Mertoun's slender income, Henry had acceded to O'Brien's proposal that they should start early in July, on a walking tour together in the south of England. 'I hope that you will include Swanage in the programme,' Helen said, more in jest than earnest, and she was surprised by Henry's ready reply, that he should like to explore the Isle of Purbeck unless Dennis were averse to the idea. Helen began to suspect that the bitterness with which Henry had hitherto regarded his uncle Richard was modified by the interest he had begun to feel in his pale, gentle cousin. Under all the circumstances, Helen felt that she could enjoy her holiday with an easy conscience, and she set out from the deserted house at Allerton in buoyant spirits.

## CHAPTER XI.

## FAIR AND FICKLE.

HELEN had taken an early train to Bixley, since there was nothing to detain her in her dismantled home and she wished to avoid travelling in the sultry heat of mid-day, so that the carriage which took Mr. Mertoun to his office met her at the station, and she found Eva and Amy lingering over their breakfast when she arrived at Leasowes.

‘You have got yourself up in the most elaborate style for the sea-side,’ said Amy, after a critical survey of her sister’s appearance : ‘that blue serge will be the very thing for Swanage, although it looks hot on such a day as this.’

‘I am glad that you approve of Mr.

Benson's taste this time,' said Helen, quick to resent her sister's condescending note of admiration: 'the dear old man sent me the dress two days ago as a slight token of his respectful regard. He explained that it was one of his Parisian patterns, for which he had no further occasion, and that he should be too much honoured by my acceptance of it.'

'Who is Mr. Benson?' asked Eva, and, while Amy ruffled up her plumes like an offended chicken, Helen's reply was prompt.

'Mr. Benson is my friend and patron, the leading linendraper of Allerton—a little, snuffy old man, who may possibly claim my acquaintance on the sands at Swanage. As I work for him regularly, I expected him to make difficulties about my coming away, but, on the contrary, he said yesterday that every one was better for a holiday, and that he had himself thought of spending the month of August at Swanage, only Mrs. B. was more

partial to Weymouth. In the course of the same evening this dress was brought in, and I am so overwhelmed with his munificence that I think of making myself a walking advertisement, and displaying the shop ticket on my sleeve.'

It was undoubtedly trying to a possible, Amy might have said to a probable, Lady Alan Rae, to hear her sister blazon abroad the favours she had received from a country draper, and Amy manifested her annoyance by declaring the necessity of going to see about her packing, and declining Helen's offers of assistance.

'Tell me about Dick,' said Helen, when she was alone with Eva. 'We have had one letter from him, illiterate but satisfied. I hope that Uncle Richard has not discovered how badly he spells.'

'He will have time to improve his spelling by a long course of copying before he is pro-

moted to any original composition,' said Eva. 'He came up here the day he arrived, but he would not stay, even for a cup of tea, as he was impatient to be off to Mr. O'Brien's lodgings, and we have not seen him since.'

'He will be quite safe with Dennis, safe and happy,' said Helen; 'Dick has a room in the same house, and I suppose that there will be nothing improper in my going there to see that his things are properly unpacked and put away.'

'I suppose not,' said Eva doubtfully: 'Mr. O'Brien is always at the Museum at this hour.'

'I was not thinking of Dennis,' said Helen, with a laugh. 'Only whether Mrs. Ball, the landlady, would think that I was taking a liberty. Why, when Dennis was at Allerton, he used to bring me his shirts to mend and his stockings to darn.'

'Oh, if he is on such brotherly terms as

that office implies, there is nothing to be said,' said Eva, smiling also. 'I can see no objection to your looking after Dick's comfort, and if Mrs. Ball thinks it an unwarrantable liberty we shall never know it. But it is too hot to walk, and if you can wait till after lunch I will drive you into Bixley.'

'The walk is nothing,' said Helen. 'I went twice as far yesterday in the hottest part of the day, walking out to the Manor Farm and back.'

'The farm in which Aunt Anne has arranged to board while you are away?' inquired Eva.

'That is Amy's way of stating, or misstating, a fact,' said Helen, colouring. 'There is no *arrangement* in the sense you mean. Mr. George Charlton and his sister made the offer, in the kindness of their hearts, putting us under an obligation which money would

not repay, if we had it to give, which we have not.'

'I did not mean to slight your friends,' said Eva, who did not in truth understand where the offence lay.

'I know that you did not, Eva, but I was irritated by the false impression which Amy had contrived to give of their generous kindness. The truth is that Amy and I survey life from different planes, and you cannot live with such an uncongenial pair of sisters for six weeks, without being disabused of your ideal of family harmony.'

'Life is a series of disillusion: one more or less cannot signify,' said Eva in a tone of weariness and dissatisfaction which still rang in Helen's ears as she walked briskly down into the town.

Helen's manner, so apt to be aggressive with those whom she held to be her equals or superiors, had a frank and winning charm



which found its way to the hearts of those with whom she had occasion to associate in the class below her. If Amy had glided into her brother's lodgings on a visit of inspection, Mrs. Ball might have felt disposed to resent such an unnecessary intrusion ; but Helen was not kept standing on the well-worn floor-cloth in the passage for more than two minutes before she and the landlady were on the most cordial terms, and she was ushered into Mr. Richard's little attic bedroom, while Mrs. Ball declared her intention of acting a mother's part to him in the matter of shirt-buttons. Helen was emboldened to relieve the desolate bareness of the room by arranging her brother's few possessions in more orderly fashion, and Mrs. Ball stood by meanwhile, with something also to say of her other lodger, Mr. O'Brien.—  
'The most regular, civillest-spoken young gentleman that ever I had in the house, Miss Mertoun. I have lived in high families,

and I know a gentleman when I see him, and so I put up with his messes of bottles and old stones and things, though goodness knows the use of such rubbish except to harbour dust. And if he had been Master Richard's own brother, he could not have taken him up shorter for sitting down to tea without washing his hands.'

'Between you and Mr. O'Brien, Master Richard ought to know when he is well off,' said Helen. 'Do, Mrs. Ball, make him understand that he must not spatter ink over the wristbands of more than one shirt a week, and discourage the practice of sticking his pen behind his ear, until he has learned to keep it there. I imagine that great blot on his shirt-collar is due to his ambition to acquire the clerk-like art of carrying a pen.'

'Law! Miss Mertoun, boys will be boys,' said Mrs. Ball sententiously, and when Helen had agreed to the axiom with the solemnity

it demanded, she felt that her mission was fulfilled, and that she might wish Mrs. Ball good morning. She did not, however, at once retrace her steps to Leasowes, but acted on the half-formed intention which had influenced her desire to visit Bixley independently, and she turned into the street which led to the Museum. 'A free day,' she remarked to herself, after a glance at the notice-board. 'That is lucky, considering the state of my finances, although I should not think sixpence an exorbitant price to pay for a few minutes' talk with Dennis.'

It was the dinner-hour at Bixley, and, with the exception of two or three artisans who had strolled in on their way from work, the rooms were empty. Helen walked on, glancing in a cursory manner at the rows of glass cases, until she reached the closed door of a room which was labelled private, and, after only a moment's hesitation, she knocked,

and Dennis O'Brien answered the summons.

'Why, Helen,' he said, a little scandalized, 'have you come all alone to invade my domain? Dick told me that you were expected at Leasowes to-day.'

'With whom should I come, Dennis? Dick is at the office, and I did not suppose you would wish me to bring Amy.'

'I did not imagine that Amy would be brought,' said Dennis. 'But I am very glad to see you, and you shall tell me the Allerton news while we take a turn through the Museum.'

'I must not stay five minutes, as I shall be late for luncheon, but I wanted to talk to you about Dick, and also to ask what you say to this Swanage scheme. Of course you think me a great fool for going?'

'No, I do not, Helen. I was rather surprised when Dick told me, but I am glad that you agreed to go. It may prevent your

sister from drifting altogether away from the old moorings.'

'On the contrary,' said Helen, 'I am convinced that Amy never sees me without feeling a more imperative necessity for breaking away from the life she despises. I get on better with Eva, but I do not expect to be on familiar terms with anything but the algæ and actiniæ until I come home again. I look forward to their nearer acquaintance with the most lively interest, and one of my objects in coming here to-day was to ask for the name of some good, cheap, exhaustive manual, since I intend to live on the rocks.'

Here the talk became technical, but it insensibly drifted back to matters of human interest. 'I have encountered the Leasowes party several times,' said Dennis: 'they came in here one day, incited, as I believe, by Lord Alan Rae, who was with them, and he called me out of my den, as you did just now, to

answer some question of your sister's about a fossil. I could see that Amy did not like it.'

'Perhaps you liked it still worse, Dennis,' said Helen, looking at him anxiously.

'I am growing callous to that sort of thing,' said O'Brien, although the working of his mobile features belied his professions of insensibility; 'people say that her engagement to Lord Alan Rae may be declared any day.'

'Then people talk nonsense, as they usually do. Amy herself told me, not a month ago, that Lord Alan wishes to marry Eva.'

Before O'Brien could declare his reasons for a different belief, the discussion was cut short by the appearance of Lord Alan himself, who had just entered the room. He came up to speak to O'Brien, and it cost him the effort of a moment's recollection to recognise in Helen the third Miss Mertoun, but nothing could be more cordial than his greeting when the effort was successful. 'Forgive

my hesitation,' he said, 'since I could not expect to see you in Bixley. I have been absent from the Hollies for a day or two and have only learned on my return, very much to my regret, that Leasowes is deserted. Pray tell your sister, when you write, how much I regret that I did not see her again.'

'I will give your message by word of mouth,' said Helen: 'I sleep at Leasowes to-night and go with my sister and cousin to Swanage to-morrow.'

A gleam of satisfaction, not unmingled with anger, lighted up Lord Alan's handsome features. 'I was misled by Lady Cecilia,' he said: 'but I shall not miss the opportunity of paying a farewell visit to Leasowes. I hoped to have found you at leisure for a scientific talk,' he added, turning to O'Brien, 'but that is a pleasure which may be deferred, as I might possibly fail to see the Miss Mertouns if I call too late.'

‘You will find me here at any time, Lord Alan,’ replied Dennis, with formal courtesy of manner.

‘I must go too,’ said Helen, less confident than before that Dennis was mistaken in the object of Lord Alan’s frequent visits to Leasowes : ‘I shall be late for lunch as it is. Good-bye, Dennis : give my blessing to Dick, in case I do not see him this evening, and cry, Turn again, Whittington, if he betrays any backsliding from the career of commerce.’

‘I have my horse,’ said Lord Alan, as they went down the outside steps of the Museum, and he discovered that Helen was on foot : ‘I am afraid that I can hardly offer to keep pace with you.’

‘Of course not,’ replied Helen : ‘the kindest thing you can do is to ride on, and beg my cousin not to wait lunch for me. I shall be hot enough as it is,’ she added to



herself, when Lord Alan had acted on this suggestion, 'and the process of manufacturing the small talk suitable to a lord would have set my face aflame for the rest of the afternoon.'

Even without this additional aggravation, Helen found it expedient to go at once to her room to efface the traces of her hot and dusty walk before taking her place at the luncheon table. Although the meal was over Eva waited for her in the dining-room, but Lord Alan and Amy had gone out to play croquet at the shady end of the garden. Helen's conviction of the unveracity of Bixley gossip was still further disturbed by this combination, and she was more struck than she had been on her first arrival by the anxious and distressed expression of her cousin's face. 'Pray do not wait for me, Eva,' she said imploringly; 'you know that this is our usual dinner-hour, and as I had an early breakfast, very much

in the rough, I am quite ungenteelly hungry. Do let me forage for myself, while you sit out to watch the croquet.'

'I can see quite enough of the game from the windows,' said Eva, and when Helen followed the direction of her cousin's eyes, she saw that the game had not in truth begun. Lord Alan was speaking with eager animation ; while Amy listened with downcast eyes, in the prettiest attitude of wrapt attention. Helen said no more, and discovered that the appetite of which she had boasted had suddenly forsaken her.

In a few minutes Amy came up to the windows : 'I wanted to see whether Helen had finished luncheon,' she said : 'there is quite a fresh breeze under the trees and you will find it pleasant sitting there, even if you are not inclined to play croquet.'

'Just as Helen likes,' said Eva, indifferently.

Helen, with a determination to note, and if possible to baffle, the treachery of which she conceived her sister to be guilty, gave her voice in favour of an adjournment to the lawn. Treachery was perhaps too strong a term to apply to Amy's conduct, but a forcible vocabulary is needed to express the rash judgments of youth. Amy did what she could to deprecate the inference which Helen was so ready to draw, by the efforts which she made to disclaim Lord Alan's pointed attentions. She declared that it was too hot for croquet, and took the garden seat beside her cousin, while Lord Alan threw himself on the turf at her feet.

'I have been deploring the break-up of our set here,' he said; 'the Hollies will be intolerably dull when Leasowes is deserted, and I think of running down to Cowes next week to look at a new yacht which is for sale

or hire there. She is still without a name, and I shall be glad to receive suggestions.'

'The "Vanessa" would not be a bad name for a yacht,' said Helen, when Amy and Eva remained silent. If she had expected the name to implant a thorn in her sister's bosom, the attempt was a failure. It did not occur to Amy that Dennis O'Brien had ever likened her to a Painted-lady butterfly, and she was equally unconscious that Vanessa was its scientific equivalent.

'The "Vanessa" let it be,' said Lord Alan. 'Look out for the name in the yachting intelligence, and when you see that she is lying at Lymington or Weymouth, you may expect the first favourable wind to bring her into Swanage Bay.' He spoke generally, but two at least of his hearers knew for whom the information was specially intended ;

and, while Eva listened with a tightening of the heart, Amy exulted in such a proof of the futility of the machinations which had been devised to estrange her from her noble lover.


## CHAPTER XII.

## THE BUTTERFLY-NET.

Two days later the three girls had settled down to the life of laborious idleness incident to a temporary residence in sea-side lodgings. Amy enjoyed the pre-eminence of being the prettiest and the best-dressed young lady visitor of the season, and she exhibited her new costumes upon the pier or as she sauntered along the cliffs which fringe the coast. Eva sat chiefly on the shore, taking a languid interest in the children who frequented the sands, and cementing a friendship with the most attractive among them by offerings of chocolate bonbons. Helen presented as strong a contrast to one of her companions in the homeliness of her attire,

as she did to the other in her superabundant energy. The glory of Mr. Benson's present was soon tarnished by her reckless scrambles over slippery sea-weed in her pursuit after natural curiosities, heedless of the rock-pools in which her skirts were draggled, as well as of the white dust of the stone quarries. Nothing came amiss to her in her zeal as a collector, and the patience of their landlady was sorely tried when the sill of every window was beset with stones and fossils, when ribands of sea-weed dangled from the hat-pegs in the hall, and the parlour was furnished with earthen pans filled with seawater and its marine inhabitants.

Before Amy awoke from her first sleep, Helen had walked to Tilly Whim to see the sun-rise; had groped among the rocks for some addition to her assortment of sea-monsters, and had been amongst the earliest bathers in the bay. From such expeditions



she would return with a glow of health and spirits, and too clamorous an appetite for breakfast to enter into Eva's critical remarks on the quality of the bread or the flavour of the butter. Her boots and gloves were reduced to the consistency of pulp by the hard usage to which she subjected them, and Amy remonstrated with her in vain on the want of foresight with which she allowed her slender store of pocket-money to melt away in the purchase of manuals of marine zoology which she read voraciously, and generally discovered to be worthless, while the various necessities of her toilette remained unsupplied.

If Amy was annoyed by her sister's lawless and unconventional habits, which threatened to bring discredit on the firm, Eva took a more tolerant view of Helen's peculiarities, and noted with a pleased eye the bronzed and ruddy colour which soon tanned the



cheek that had become sallow under the influence of a sedentary life. She was anxious to put the largest possible amount of pleasure into Helen's brief holiday, and was always willing to take a carriage to explore the surrounding country; but the weather was still sultry, and it was agreed to defer any more distant expeditions until Henry Mertoun should make his appearance. The scheme for his tour with Dennis O'Brien began to take shape soon after their arrival at Swanage; and he wrote that the Isle of Purbeck was to be their destination, since Dennis considered that it would be a profitable field both for sketching and entomology. Dennis proposed to give some days to the sketching of Corfe Castle, and Henry would avail himself of their halt there to come over to see his sisters. Helen was only half-satisfied: she could see Henry at Allerton, and had a much greater desire for O'Brien's sympathy

and assistance in her marauding excursions on the sea-shore ; but they all felt that the masculine element could be introduced into their narrow circle with advantage, and looked forward to Henry's coming as to an era.

The days lengthened into weeks, and Amy had seen the white sails of several yachts furled in Swanage Bay with a quickening hope, which faded again in disappointment when she learned the names of their owners. The 'Vanessa' came not, and it was Henry's arrival which made the first break in the monotony of their life. He walked in one afternoon, dusty and travel-worn, but full of enjoyment, and declaring Dennis to be the most genial and intelligent of travelling companions, with an emphasis which was plainly designed for Amy's benefit.

'I do not doubt it,' said Helen ; 'there are a hundred things I want to ask him if he would only come here.'


‘I doubt if he will do that,’ replied Henry, ‘but I think that he will receive you graciously if you are disposed to act Mahomet’s part. Have you seen Corfe Castle?’

‘We have seen nothing,’ said Eva, ‘because we waited for you to take us about. Let us order a carriage and drive over early to-morrow to spend a long day among the ruins.’

‘An ingenious way of introducing Henry to the beauties of Swanage,’ remarked Amy, who never went willingly out of sight of the quay.

‘Its beauties are soon seen,’ replied Henry; ‘it is a stony aggregation of small houses, and awakens no desire for more intimate acquaintance.’

‘Besides,’ added Helen, ‘Henry will come back with us to-morrow night, and stay here as long as Dennis is at Corfe Castle.




In spite of his disparaging remark, he will allow that the place has sketching capabilities when he has walked round the coast with me. We might take a turn before breakfast.'

'Thank you,' said Henry with a laugh; 'I have come here for a little respite from O'Brien's unflagging energy in sight-seeing, and will not fall a prey to your merciless strength. Eva has already described the limits of your morning stroll, and cart-ropes will not draw me out before breakfast. But we will go together to bespeak my bed at the inn, and then perhaps walk up to the best point of view for the sunset.'

Henry set out with both his sisters, but Amy was not prepared to accompany him even for this limited distance; and, as they retraced their steps from the inn, she declared her intention of turning on to the wooden jetty to await the arrival of the Poole

steamer. 'Such a misguided thing to do,' remarked Helen, as she and her brother ascended the hill; 'Amy takes the deepest interest in the arrival of that steamer, which she considers to be our only link with the civilised world.' Helen spoke at random and with no prevision of the links in which passing events were even now welding the chain of Amy's fate.

The 'Royal Albert' was discharging its passengers when Amy walked down the pier, and she did not feel any lively interest in the two middle-aged spinsters in blue veils who were obstinately resisting the blandishments of the boatmen who proposed to relieve them of their loose parcels; nor yet in the careworn father of a family, as he stood still to count over his property, which consisted of boxes of every shape and size, a bath, a perambulator and a baby, not to mention two pale-faced girls, and a miniature sailor who



considered his wooden spade and pail the only important articles in the miscellaneous pile. These were the objects which first met Amy's view, and she regarded them with a languid amusement which was lost in a very different feeling when she caught sight of a tall, fair young man, in a yachting dress, who was crossing the gangway. Their eyes met, on his side with a smile of animated pleasure, on hers with a blush of rosy red, and before his foot touched the pier Amy had turned away with an instinctive desire not to court recognition. She had gone but a few paces before she became conscious that Lord Alan was by her side.

‘Do you run away from me?’ he asked, in a low breathless voice.


‘It looked as if I had come to meet you,’ replied Amy with downcast eyes.

‘May I hope that you have so come? If I am not ashamed to say that I have come

a hundred miles in the hope of seeing you again, you need not grudge me a poor hundred yards.'

'I began to think that you would not come at all,' said Amy, no longer attempting to conceal the fact that she had in truth watched and waited for him.

'The time has seemed long to me also, Miss Mertoun, although I have not been idle. As soon as I had completed my purchase of the "Vanessa," I ran down to Cowes, first to collect my crew, and then to try and make the yacht a little more worthy of the precious freight she is to carry. My arrangements were only concluded yesterday, and, when the wind dropped this afternoon before I could reach Swanage, I ran the "Vanessa" under Branksea and boarded the steamer as she passed. I must go back by her in a quarter of an hour to sleep on board the yacht, but I shall be back with the first



tide to-morrow, in time for our promised cruise.'

'We have made an engagement for to-morrow,' said Amy; 'my cousin has arranged that we should drive to Corfe Castle.'

'I was not thinking of your cousin, Miss Mertoun. Are *you* bound to be of the party?'

'They expect me to go. It will seem strange that I should stay here alone,' said Amy.

'Surely you can plead a headache, fear of the heat—anything that will procure us the happiness of spending some happy hours in each other's society, unwatched by curious and grudging eyes. Or is such a prospect distasteful?'

'Not distasteful,' said Amy, and her increasing embarrassment gave courage to Lord Alan's importunity.



‘In all my arrangements, my one thought has been how to give you pleasure; and you are the only being whom I care to see on board the “Vanessa.” I shall come ashore in the boat at ten to-morrow, and shall hope to find you on the south side of the quay. Come in a boating dress, for if the day be favourable you need not be afraid to take a short cruise.’

‘I am not afraid of the sea,’ said Amy.

‘Still less, I hope, of me,’ rejoined Lord Alan, in accents of tenderest reproach. The steamboat bell was ringing its energetic signal for departure, but he still lingered at the pier gate with Amy’s hand fast locked in his. Unwillingly he relinquished his grasp, and walked slowly away, with more than one backward glance, and he was gone before Amy had uttered a syllable of the reply in which she tried, or fancied that she tried, to

disclaim the possibility of keeping the appointment Lord Alan had made.

Amy little thought that the parting, from which the most uninterested bystander could read something of tender sentiment, had flashed its full meaning before the indignant eyes of Eva. She had stepped out to make some necessary purchases for to-morrow's picnic, and was passing the gate at the moment when Lord Alan turned away; she could not be mistaken in her cousin, and a second glance was scarcely needed to identify her companion. Eva turned pale and hurried on, whilst Amy retraced her steps to the house, unconscious of the recognition.

At the tea-table that evening, when Helen and her brother were discussing some point of history in connection with Corfe Castle, Amy announced her intention not to join the party. 'On thinking over the matter,' she said, 'I have decided not to go with you.

There is no need to make a mystery of the fact that Dennis and I are not on easy terms together, and our mutual constraint might spoil the pleasure of the rest.'

'Dennis ought to feel flattered by such consideration for his feelings,' remarked Henry, 'and yet I fancy that he might endure some hours in your society without any very acute suffering.'

'Very possibly,' said Amy colouring, 'but still we may be happier apart, and I shall enjoy a quiet day upon the sands.'

'It is a long day to spend *alone*,' said Eva, with a stress on the last word, intended to mark her sense of her cousin's duplicity; but the shaft fell short, since Amy was still unconscious of the chance which had revealed her stolen interview with Lord Alan.

'I must observe that I shall get more good out of Dennis if Amy is not there,' said

Helen, 'and I do not feel heroic enough to give up the day's pleasuring on her account. Do let us go, Eva, and enjoy ourselves without any qualms of conscience.'

'My conscience is clear,' said Eva, with a peculiar smile, which puzzled Helen, while it altogether escaped Amy's notice. She was satisfied to have the matter arranged with so little trouble, and sat working in silence and with a pre-occupied mind.

Henry talked of Dick's start in the office at Bixley, and Eva was gratified by his frank acknowledgment of Mr. Mertoun's great kindness to him. 'The Charltons invited Dick to spend a Sunday with us at the farm,' he said, 'and I thought him improved, more manly and intelligent, and interested in his work. He went back on Monday to dine at Leasowes, an invitation by which he was flattered, though awe-struck.'

'Poor Dick *tête-à-tête* with Uncle Richard!'

exclaimed Helen : 'how stupid Uncle Richard must have thought him !'

'I suspect that his uncle may be more tolerant of dulness than his sister,' said Eva.

'Very possibly : I know that Henry and I are both intolerant,' replied Helen : 'the truth is, that as we do not mix with people to see them as they are, we have leisure to construct the ideal of what they ought to be.'

'A philosophic excuse for fastidiousness,' observed Henry with a smile.

Helen had never seen her brother in such happy and natural spirits, and doubted whether to ascribe the fact to O'Brien's genial influence, or that the sense of injury which had so long rankled in his breast, embittering his relations with his uncle Richard, was effaced by an awakening interest in his cousin. Although sometimes provoked by Eva's variable spirits, and her

fits of languor and depression, the two girls had learned to love each other in the close intimacy of the last three weeks, and Helen found some amusement in weaving a romance between the Romeo and Juliet of the rival houses. At present, however, the courtship could only be suspected by a very lively imagination, for Eva was gentle and indifferent, and Henry's native roughness of manner was but little softened in her favour.

Although Helen was the only one of the party who felt any unwillingness to anticipate the usual hour of bedtime, it was Helen again who was first wrapped in sleep. Amy and Eva occupied two little chambers opening into each other, and long after the door of communication had been closed between them, Eva could see the light of her cousin's candle shining under it, and could hear Amy moving softly about. Amy could not, or at all events did not, account to herself for the

restlessness which prompted her to put all her possessions in perfect order that night. She looked over the contents of her desk and took out a little packet, containing one or two notes from Dennis, and some songs which he had copied for her ; and, as she set a light to the papers in the empty grate, and watched the flame die away in a smouldering heap of ashes, Amy felt that she had in truth taken leave of her old life, and was prepared to face the future, which was opening before her. When, at last, she went to bed she found it possible to sleep peacefully through the grey dawn of the summer's morning, while Eva lay watching it with worn and sleepless eyes, and tried to school her rebellious heart into the conviction that the friend who had betrayed and the lover who had deceived her were alike unworthy of regret.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## THE CAPTURE.

THE morning was still grey when the young people met again at an early breakfast, but this, as Henry observed, would be an advantage for their drive, and he was confident that the clouds would clear away, and the sun shine forth to gild the ruins of Corfe Castle. While the other two were too eager in their preparations to notice that anything was amiss, Amy observed that Eva was pale and silent, and followed her upstairs to ask whether she were quite fit for the long day's expedition.

There was a suppressed fierceness in the tone of Eva's reply which was strangely at



variance with her habitual gentleness of manner. 'Do you really wish me to stay at home, Amy?'

'O no, dear Eva; I mean, not on my account,' said Amy, annoyed by the consciousness of rising colour: 'but I thought you looked ill, and I promised Uncle Richard that I would take care of you.'

'I mean to go,' said Eva, shortly, and Amy, conscious of a disinterested motive in her suggestion, and of considerable relief in its rejection, turned into Helen's room with a virtuous sense of her own heroism in having attempted—and failed—to interfere with Lord Alan's scheme for their mutual enjoyment. She found Helen in the highest spirits, as she collected the implements for her day's pleasuring, which included on this occasion a geological hammer and chisel, a tin case for botanical purposes, and a butterfly net and beetle-box. Amy wished to add a sun-

shade to this miscellaneous baggage, but Helen rejected the suggestion with scorn.

‘For the good of my complexion, Amy? You know very well that I parted with that superfluous article the day after we got here, and I do not miss it in the least. You must come with us if the party is to wear any air of distinction, and it is not too late to think better of it.’ But Amy considered that it was too late, and the carriage drove off without her.

When Misbourne came to inquire at what hour she would be pleased to dine, Amy replied that she intended to take some biscuits and spend the day on the beach, and that most probably she should require nothing else until the rest of the party returned from Corfe Castle. Such Spartan fare was more in accordance with Helen’s tastes and habits than with her sister’s, but Misbourne was on ceremonious terms with ‘Miss Amy’ and

made no comment on the fact, and Amy, although she told herself that she had quite made up her mind to decline Lord Alan's proposal of a cruise in his yacht more resolutely than she had done on the preceding evening, went upstairs and exchanged her light summer cambric for a boating dress before she repaired to the beach.

She established herself in the shade of a boat near the jetty, but the light and variable wind on which Lord Alan's movements must depend, rendered him more tardy in his appearance, and Amy had leisure for some anxious surmises while she bent over her lace-work, and fancied that the nursery-maids in her neighbourhood would guess her motive if she scanned the horizon too closely. Towards noon, as the weather-wise had predicted, the clouds rolled off, a fresh breeze sprang up, and Amy presently descried the white sails of the 'Vanessa,' as she rounded

the point, and glided gracefully into the bay. When the yacht lay to, her boat was manned to bring her owner to the shore, and Lord Alan's eager glance soon fell on Amy, who sat as motionless as if she wished to elude observation.

'You have not come to meet me this time, Amy,' said he smiling. It was the first time that he had dropped the more formal appellation, and although Amy's womanly instinct told her that no explanation had passed between them to justify such an advance, she ventured on no protest.

'You are prepared for our cruise; I see,' continued Lord Alan, 'and we had better go on board at once, while the wind serves for sailing.'

'I have been thinking,' said Amy, 'that it would be better to put off our cruise until to-morrow, and wander along the cliffs this morning. Helen is fond of sailing, and she

and my brother Henry would both enjoy going with you.'

'Have I left the Hollies for the pleasure of taking your brother and sister out yachting?' said Lord Alan, with a shade of haughtiness in his tone: 'must I say it yet again, Amy? It is for you, and you alone that all my arrangements were made, and since my company is distasteful to you, I will go back as I came.'

The tears stood in Amy's beautiful eyes as she looked up with a mute beseeching glance, ready to yield, and yet trembling, as if the full meaning of the step which she was about to take dawned upon her. 'For an hour, or two hours at the most, I will go with you,' she faltered, and Alan Rae accepted the concession with gratitude and renewed tenderness.

'Nay, Amy; I have frightened you by my hasty words. You shall not stay on board an

hour nor a minute longer than it seems good to you, but you must give your own orders to the sailing master, since I can take no note of time whilst you are by my side. And you must come at once while the tide serves.'

Amy suffered Lord Alan to raise her from the beach, and she did not withdraw her hand, though it trembled a little, when he pressed it for a moment to his lips.

It was necessary to embark from the pier, and as they passed along it, Amy was sensible that they were a mark for curious glances from the knot of idlers who were gathered there, after the fashion of sea-side places. It was also evident that Lord Alan observed and resented the inquisition, and he waved off with a haughty air the officious help of those who wished to lend a hand in pushing off the boat. Amy breathed more freely when they were not only on board the yacht, but installed in the luxuriously fitted

and airy cabin in which, as Lord Alan said, she would be more comfortable until the noon-day heat was over; and yet her composure was of short duration, since Lord Alan reclined on the cushions by her side, and whispered with the assured confidence of an accepted lover: 'Mine now, Amy,—now, and for ever.'

'Not Amy,' she faltered, struggling even now to express the conviction that it was not thus she should be wooed and won.

'And why not Amy—*Bien-aimée*—Amy to me, if to none other in the world beside. I take but what I ask: call me Alan, and the cup of my pleasure will be full.' And his name was scarcely breathed through Amy's scarlet lips before a lover's kiss had repaid her compliance.

This was at high noon, and it was eight hours later when the happy, tired party returned to Swanage from Corfe Castle,—

returned in triumph, as Helen considered, with Dennis O'Brien in the carriage. He had made a successful sketch of the ruins, and was not unwilling to be allured by Helen's representations of the geological wealth of the rocks and stone-quarries; and if Amy's image hovered in the background as a more powerful attraction, her name was unspoken by either. Misbourne was already on the door-step, awaiting their arrival with a disturbed face, and the information that her other young lady had gone out at ten o'clock and had not returned. There had been a thunderstorm, and a squall of wind and rain, and 'she hoped to goodness that Miss Amy might not be drowned, nor fallen over the cliff.'

A chill of dismay fell on the hearts of all, and Henry answered roughly, as a man speaks to disclaim an over-mastering fear: 'Of course you would have heard if there had



been any accident. Amy has probably taken shelter somewhere from the storm, but I will go out at once to make inquiries.'

'Miss Amy could not take shelter if she were out at sea,' rejoined the housekeeper : 'and that is what some people say, but I could not understand the rights of it.'

'It is absurd to suppose that she would go out boating by herself, and you have said, Eva, that you have not a single acquaintance here.'

'It is not for me to speak,' said the housekeeper, after a glance at her young mistress, who seemed incapable of reply : 'but some one told the landlady that she was seen to get into a boat this morning which came ashore to fetch her.'

'Why should we waste time in this way ?' said Dennis impatiently : 'let us go in different directions to make inquiries.'

The two young men were about to act on

this suggestion, and Helen wondered whether she might also leave her cousin to take part in the search, when Eva laid her trembling hand on Henry's shoulder. 'One word with you first,' she said, and Helen drew O'Brien into the passage, that the other two might be left together.

'What is the mystery?' said Dennis, forgetting the laws of good-breeding in his fierce anxiety.

'None that I know of,' said Helen, who met his troubled eyes with a steady gaze: 'it must be some absurdity of Misbourne's, since she considers herself responsible for our health and morals, and she is always fussy. Certainly it is not Amy's habit to be out for so many hours, but if the storm broke here with greater violence than it did at Corfe, and she were weather-bound at any distance from home, she might feel timid about walking home alone in the dusk.'

While Helen sought to satisfy her own uneasiness as well as that of her companion by this explanation, Henry was agitated by Eva's surmise as to the true cause of his sister's disappearance. 'I wanted to ask you to go to the pier first,' she said : 'the boatmen will be sure to know if Amy has gone out with anyone.'

'With *anyone*, Eva ? With whom could she go, since you say that you have no acquaintance here ?'

'I said so when you first arrived. An hour later I saw Lord Alan Rae taking leave of Amy at the pier-gate, and he may have brought his yacht here.'

'He *may* have brought his yacht here,' repeated Henry angrily; 'I can only suppose that you have connived at their clandestine meeting.'

'It is not so, Henry. I may have done wrong in not telling you or Helen that I

witnessed their meeting yesterday evening, but I saw it by a mere chance. I was not in Amy's confidence.'

'Forgive me, Eva,' said Henry, recollecting himself; 'it is not easy for a man to be smooth-tongued when he has to face the possibility of his sister's disgrace and ruin. I will go at once to the pier-head, but I cannot, I dare not, tell O'Brien in what direction your fears point. For all his assumption of indifference, such a suspicion would wring his heart.'

When Henry came out into the passage Dennis took his arm, saying that he would go with him.

'No, Dennis, no!' replied Henry, shaking him off; 'wait here whilst I go down to the quay, I shall be back in five minutes.' As the clock counts time the interval was scarcely longer, but to the three who sat

looking on each other with blanched faces the pause seemed almost intolerable.

When Henry returned, any consideration for his friend was lost in overwhelming emotion. 'It is true, by Heaven!' he exclaimed, 'a yacht called the "Vanessa" came into the bay this morning; the owner's name did not transpire, but the description of his appearance tallies with that of Lord Alan. He came ashore in a boat, met Amy on the beach, and took her at once on board the yacht, so that I make no doubt that the villainy was deliberately planned.'

'There was a sudden change of wind, which may have prevented them from getting back,' said Helen.

'The wind changed at six o'clock, just before the thunderstorm,' replied Henry; 'if they had intended to come back at all, they would have been anxious to do so before we returned from Corfe. I learned from the

boatmen that the "Vanessa" is a large new yacht ; she came from Cowes yesterday, and stood across for the Needles on leaving the bay as if to go down the Solent again.'

There was a little murmur, a sort of stifled sigh from Eva, and Helen turned round to see that she had fainted. 'You had better go away,' said Helen quickly ; 'send Misbourne to me, and I will join you presently.' Misbourne came, but the young men seemed unwilling to leave the room until a faint tinge of colour, and the tears which welled from beneath her closed eyelids, betrayed that Eva's consciousness was returning.

'We will walk up and down outside, until we have decided what to do,' whispered Henry ; 'tell Eva that I blame her in nothing ; I fancy that I spoke roughly to her just now.'

It was a dark, cloudy evening, and in the

gathering twilight which veiled the working of his features, Dennis found it more easy to declare his purpose. "There is but one thing to be done," he said, "let us go back to catch the mail train at Wareham. One of us must go to Portsmouth, and from thence, to all the yacht stations in the Solent; the other to London, in case he has decided to go there, or to Scotland."

'You, Dennis, will *you* go in pursuit of her?' said Henry.

'And why not?' he replied. "Do you think that I can bear to sit with folded hands while it may still be possible to avert dishonour from the name of the woman I have loved?"

'I will go to Portsmouth,' said Henry, after a pause; 'since the yacht is new, and just fitted for sea, I suspect that it has been part of his infernal scheme to keep her on board until her ruin was complete. It is well that you are a man, Dennis, and can

find relief in action. You see what the shock has done for Eva, and I feel as if it might kill my mother when she comes to hear of it.'



## CHAPTER XIV.

## APPLES OF SODOM.

HENRY MERTOUN had done Alan Rae some injustice when he imputed to him a deliberate plan for Amy's ruin. He had formed no such plan, but he abandoned himself to the gratification of the moment without suffering it to be alloyed by any foreshadowing of evil consequences. For a brief space it appeared to Amy that her anticipations were fully realised, and that every hour was bringing her nearer to the brilliant and successful marriage which had been the object of her ambition. The little vessel danced gaily over the waves, and Lord Alan was constantly by her side, whispering those tender nothings in which passion first finds expres-

sion, evincing the tenderest solicitude for her comfort, and drawing her attention to arrangements which had been planned, as he often repeated, expressly with a view to her accommodation. Yet misgivings began to arise in Amy's breast, when it appeared that his entire satisfaction in the present left no room for any consideration for the future; and it cost her an effort to respond with a smile to the remark that Lady Cecilia had been successfully blinded by her nephew's intimation of his purpose to spend a few weeks in yachting with a 'companion.' It was a designation which grated on Amy's ear.

'Where are we going?' she asked presently.

'Nowhere in particular. We are about three hours out from Swanage, and it may take us twice as long to beat back again.'

'Then it will be dark, and the rest of my

party will have returned from Corfe Castle,' said Amy, turning pale.

'Very possibly. If they take their pleasure, why should not we?' said Lord Alan, gaily. But when he saw Amy's eyes fill with tears, he turned away with a whistle of annoyance, and said that he would go and talk to the sailing master. He was absent for some minutes, which gave Amy time to recover her composure, and to resolve to be pleased with his decree, whatever it might be.

'Berridge says that we cannot possibly get back to Swanage to-night,' said he; 'wind and tide are both against us, and there is a storm coming up.'

'What are we to do?' replied Amy with a sinking heart.

Alan thrust his hands into his pockets and looked out of the cabin windows, as he answered with a more successful assumption of indifference: 'What can we do, but spend

the night on board, after running in for shelter somewhere ?’

‘Oh, Alan,’ said Amy, bursting into tears, and hiding her face in her hands. He took her in his arms and soothed her with the tenderest reproaches, wilfully mistaking the cause of her distress.

‘So easily frightened by the mention of a storm, my love ! Only this morning you declared that you could live on the sea, and to-morrow your nautical fervour will revive with the sunshine. If you anticipate trouble in returning to Swanage, let us give up the idea of returning at all. We will take a maid on board at Portsmouth, with everything which is necessary for your comfort, and run across the channel to Cherbourg or Dieppe.’

Before Amy could even attempt a reply, a distant roll of thunder, a flutter and rustle of wind, and the large drops which specked the white deck, heralded the approaching storm.

Lord Alan, who had already taken her below, was unable to remain with her, since the wind had chopped round to the east, and he felt that his presence was necessary on deck in the confusion incident to a sudden shifting of the sails. Amy was left alone, feeling a little sea-sick, and very frightened and miserable. As the peals of thunder rolled nearer and one bright flash of lightning illumined the cabin with its lurid glare, her terror became almost uncontrollable, and it was in this pitiable state that Lord Alan found her when his services were no longer required on deck. He wished to be tender, but there was a touch of annoyance in his attempts to reassure her.

‘Amy, my dear love, look up, and remember that no harm can happen to you whilst I am by your side. The thunder-storm is nothing, and will roll off in half-an-hour, but since the change of wind must pre-

vent our getting further to-night, I propose to run into Lymington or Yarmouth.'

'Oh, I am so thankful!' exclaimed Amy, looking up in sudden relief. 'Let us go to Lymington. I cannot stay in the yacht. I must go back to Swanage to-night.'

'To get back to Swanage to-night is out of the question,' said Lord Alan shortly. 'Consider its distance from any railway-station, and it may be nine or ten o'clock before we get up to Lymington. To-morrow, if you will—'

'To-morrow will be too late,' said Amy, with a fresh burst of tears. 'I shall not dare to meet Henry.'

Lord Alan made no reply until a louder clap of thunder brought on another access of terror, and when Amy uttered a scream, he laid his hand heavily upon her shoulder: 'Control yourself, Amy, for your own sake, if not for mine; remember that in a small

vessel like this everything is heard, and let us avoid a scandal if possible. I will do anything in reason to satisfy you.'

Amy checked her sobs, and looked up with the pretty, pouting wilfulness of a petted child. 'You must not be unkind to me, Alan. Set me on shore, and I will find my own way home.'

'And you call that request reasonable, Amy? Do you propose to spend the night alone on the mud shores of the estuary? In a few minutes the storm will be over, and then you will smile at your own fears, and allow that now and always I am to think and act for you. The tide will soon carry us up to Lymington, where we shall be under shelter; but I think it will be best to remain on board the yacht, since there is no hotel fit for your accommodation.'

'I do not want to go to the hotel,' said Amy. 'If we cannot get back to

Swanage, we may at any rate go on—on to London.'

'And why to London?' said Lord Alan, fixing his eyes upon her for a moment, and then turning away, as if unwilling to read in her imploring gaze the desperate hope to which she clung, that even yet her good name might be saved by a hasty marriage.

'We will go to London, if you wish it,' he said at last. In the unreasonable state of mind to which Amy's terrors had reduced her, he felt that any attempt to urge her further to entertain his suggestion of remaining on board the yacht might cause a scandal, which he wished to avoid. He was annoyed, and at little pains to conceal his annoyance; but, with the morning light and the facility for escaping the eyes of the world, which could be better attained in a great city than elsewhere, he felt confident that she would acquiesce submissively in whatever he might decree.



and what that decree was to be he would not now pause to decide.

Dennis O'Brien got out of the mail-train at Brockenhurst, and, since the night was dark and rainy, and he had travelled in the last carriage, the two shrouded figures who hurried into a reserved compartment in the fore-part of the train escaped his notice. He went into the office to inquire whether any passengers had booked from Lymington or Brockenhurst by this or by the preceding train ; and, since the booking clerk was short and surly in his answers, as men are apt to be in the small hours of the night, the train moved on before he obtained the information which he sought. 'A lady and gentleman,' repeated the clerk; 'how should I know whether it were a lady? A gentleman telegraphed from Lymington for a reserved carriage, and drove up just in time to catch the train—a tall gentleman in a pea-jacket, and he and

they booked for London and went on by this very train.'

A few more inquiries satisfied O'Brien that he was on the right track ; and he looked hopelessly at the two red lights of the receding train, and chafed through the chill and weary hours which elapsed before he could again start in pursuit of the fugitives.

Amy snatched an hour's troubled slumber while she sat by her lover's side ; and when she opened her eyes to see the summer sunrise flooding the landscape with rosy light, and to hear Lord Alan's renewed expressions of devoted attachment, her scruples and misgivings seemed to have fled with the darkness. She made no further inquiries as to their destination, and Lord Alan directed the driver of the cab which he hailed on their arrival at Waterloo, to take them to the Charing Cross hotel.

'You require some hours' rest after all this

hurry and agitation,' he said : ' I will order a room for you, and when we meet at breakfast or luncheon, as the case may be, it will be time enough to decide on our future plans.'

Amy acquiesced in this arrangement with gentle submission, and when she was shown into a bedroom adjoining the private sitting-room, in which Lord Alan said that he should be found whenever she required him, she threw herself on the bed, and slept like a tired child. Three hours afterwards, she re-appeared, refreshed by a sound sleep, and by such toilette as was possible in her destitute condition, but she still looked pale and heavy-eyed, and her composure was easily upset. Lord Alan rang for breakfast, and ordered a cutlet.

' Cutlets, my lord ?' said the glib waiter : ' yes, my lord, and for her ladyship likewise ?'

' Cutlets for two,' replied Lord Alan stiffly,

adding by way of comment as soon as the door was closed : ' Officious beast ! I suppose that he has been studying the engraved plate on my dressing-case.'

Amy walked to the window, without attempting to reply, and when Alan constrained her with gentle force to turn her face towards him, he saw that it was covered with tears. ' My timid, shrinking love,' he said, ' why should the mistake distress you ? The man has only ante-dated a title of which you shall have no cause to feel ashamed.'

' It is foolish of me,' said Amy, smiling now at the vague assurance which made her heart flutter with renewed hope.

' The night journey has made you nervous,' resumed Lord Alan : ' after breakfast you will take a more reasonable view of life, and then I hope to charm away all your fears of the sea. Once again on board the yacht, which is to be in readiness for us at Cowes, you will be safe

from any annoyance.' Amy's heart sank again, and all Lord Alan's tender watchfulness for her comfort and his repeated assurances that the joy of her presence gave a new charm to life, failed to restore her cheerfulness.

Breakfast was scarcely over, when the waiter brought in a card: 'A gentleman wishing to speak with you, my lord.'

'Bid him wait: I will see him by-and-by in the coffee-room,' said Lord Alan, putting the card from him with a haughty gesture.

'Henry,' gasped Amy, turning pale as death.

'No, my dear love, not your brother. He may conceive himself entitled to see you, although I do not allow that any man on earth has the right to interfere between us; but this is a message from young O'Brien, and if I see him at all, it will be to demand an account of his impertinent intrusion. Meanwhile, let him

wait.' But, as he spoke, a knock at the door was followed by O'Brien's entrance, and Lord Alan started up in fierce anger. 'Probably, sir, you are not aware that this is a private room.'

'I am aware of it, Lord Alan,' said Dennis, standing his ground firmly, although scarcely able to master his emotion when his eyes fell on Amy's shrinking form : 'it appears to me that a private room is best adapted for such an interview as this must be. I shall not detain you long ; I will not detain you at all, if Miss Mertoun is prepared to return with me to her friends.'

Amy turned her head away, as she sank down on the sofa, trembling and speechless ; and Lord Alan held her hand in a grasp which trembled also with suppressed fury.


'Address yourself to me, sir, if you must speak at all,' he said : 'I must first learn the

pretext for your unwelcome intrusion. Do you claim the rights of a discarded lover ?'

'I claim no interest in the matter, except as her brother's friend,' said Dennis, and the words sounded strangely cold, as they fell from his pale lips : 'Henry Mertoun empowered me to act for him, if I were the first to light upon the right track. No doubt he will start for London as soon as he receives the telegram I have just despatched, but in the meantime I am prepared to take Miss Mertoun to her mother's house.'

'Miss Mertoun can dispense with your services, Mr. O'Brien. Speak to him, Amy, assure him that your choice is made, that you have cast in your lot to live and die with one who truly loves you.'

Amy's lips moved without uttering a sound, but the gesture with which she clung to Alan Rae's arm, and hid her face on his shoulder was significant enough. To forsake



her lover at Henry's bidding would have been hard, but to turn from him in O'Brien's presence seemed impossible.

'Now, sir, perhaps you are satisfied,' said Lord Alan.

'Satisfied to go back and tell her mother that one who calls himself a gentleman has constrained a woman to proclaim her own dishonour!' rejoined Dennis.

The stinging truth struck home, and wrung from Lord Alan the avowal which had, up to that moment, formed no part of his profligate scheme. 'Who talks of dishonour, Mr. O'Brien? If Amy is not yet my wedded wife, it is because you have surprised us before marriage was possible. I go from here to my banker's to take the necessary steps for procuring a special license, and I invite you to be present at our wedding this afternoon, and will further do you the honour of requesting you to give the bride away.'



‘I will not shrink from the task,’ said Dennis steadily, as his eyes fell once more upon Amy. She sat still with averted face, but the nervous action with which she clasped and unclasped her hands seemed to betray her sense of degradation in the eyes of the man who had so lately esteemed her the noblest thing on earth. ‘I doubt whether Henry Mertoun can be here in time, and it will be a relief to him to find that you have made the only reparation which is possible for this night’s work. I shall remain in the hotel until you can fix the time and place for our meeting this afternoon.’

‘Do you doubt my word, Mr. O’Brien, that you propose to remain here as a spy upon my actions?’

‘Such was not my meaning,’ said O’Brien, with studied courtesy, divining Lord Alan’s inclination to pick a quarrel with him, which might vindicate his liberty of action: ‘I have

had a sleepless night, and a hurried journey, and I see no necessity for further exertion.'

He left the room, and Lord Alan remained to writhe under the conviction that he had pledged his honour as a gentleman to the step from which he recoiled. When Amy lifted her eyes in timid gratitude, she met a very different expression in her lover's face.

'That man,—that hound, Amy, who has dared to come between us; did I hit the mark when I called him your discarded lover?'


'If it had been Henry, he would have been even more cruel in his anger,' faltered Amy.

'That is not the question. I repeat, what is this man to you?'

'I believe that he loved me a little once; you can see for yourself that he hates and despises me now. Oh, Alan, if *you* turn against me, you had better kill me at once.'

‘I am to marry you instead,’ he replied with something like a sneer. ‘You and O’Brien have elected that it is so to be. As things were, I was prepared to be your slave; as they are, your husband must also be your master. I have a right to claim perfect candour as to your relations with the past, absolute submission with regard to the future. As I have already said, O’Brien shall give my bride away, since I could not inflict upon him more refined torture, but when that part is played out I forbid you ever again to see, or speak with, him. Do you understand my words?’

‘Yes, Alan,’ said Amy, low and submissively, and Alan’s suspicious temper was appeased for the moment, since he could not read the doubt and terror which chilled her heart. The apple of Sodom at which Amy had snatched was already crumbling to ashes in her grasp.



## CHAPTER XV.

## THE WEDDING.

LATE in the afternoon of the same day, O'Brien met Henry Mertoun at the Waterloo Station. 'It is you, Dennis,' said Henry, as their hands met in close union, and eyes that were haggard with anxiety and sleeplessness were moistened for a moment: 'you would scarcely be here unless you had good news for me.'

'I hope that it is good,' said Dennis. 'I come straight from Lord Alan's wedding, and it was I who gave away the bride! Such is the irony of fate.' In few words he went on to relate his morning's work, and indeed, Henry was intolerant of details.

'We will talk of it no more,' he said: 'it

is a black, heartless business, and but for you it might have been infinitely worse. We shall never forget what we owe you, Dennis.'

'I wish that forgetfulness were possible,' he replied emphatically : 'the haughty gloom of Lord Alan's manner, and your sister's nervous timidity, will haunt my dreams for many a day. Do you intend to see them?'

'No,' rejoined Henry, 'Amy has chosen her own lot and must abide by it ; I will neither make nor mar in the matter, and it will be better for me to go down to Allerton before some garbled version of the facts reaches my mother's ears. It is so likely that a Swanage grocer will make capital out of the excitement by sending a paragraph to the newspapers, and I charged Helen not to write until she had certain intelligence to give. If you feel disposed to finish your tour in Purbeck, it would be a satisfaction to the two girls to hear particulars from

yourself. I have neither heart nor funds for any more holiday-making, and I shall go back to my desk at the Bank to-morrow.'

Dennis acquiesced in this arrangement and went down to Poole that evening, in order that he might take the first steamer to Swanage on the following day. Helen, apprised of his movements, and of the bare fact of her sister's marriage, by a few hurried lines from her brother, awaited his arrival on the pier; but neither seemed able to enter at once on the subject of which their hearts'were full, and O'Brien's first inquiry was for Eva.

'She slept a little last night, but she is very low and nervous, and I doubt whether she will be really better until we get away from here. I thought that the fresh air might revive her, but she thinks it impossible to go out, because people will stare. I say, let them stare, but Eva is so thin-skinned.'

'You must both wish to get away,' said

Dennis, 'and your mother will need you much.'

'Poor mother ! I hunger to be with her,' said Helen, in an unsteady voice. 'I could not leave Eva here alone, and I wait for Uncle Richard's answer, as she has written to ask whether she may go home. Do you know where *they* have gone, Dennis ? not, I imagine, to Lady Cecilia's.'

'I suppose that they will go, or have already gone, to Scotland,' replied Dennis : 'Henry sent an advertisement of the wedding to the papers yesterday, and Lord Alan may think it expedient to see his father before the announcement meets his eyes.'

'Tell me what you think of it all, Dennis ?' said Helen, looking up suddenly.

'That is a large question, and we had better sit down if we are to talk the matter out,' replied O'Brien, throwing himself on the sands, a little in advance of Helen, so that she

could not see his face. 'I think, Helen, that Lady Alan Rae has dark days in store for her, and that she, in her inmost heart, knows that she has staked her happiness on a false issue.'

'For the present, at all events, I should have thought that the knowledge that she *is* Lady Alan Rae would satisfy her aspirations,' said Helen. 'It is his conduct which puzzles me—why he should risk the displeasure of his family, and give up so much for her sake, unless he truly loves her.' And Dennis was not disposed to enlighten her as to the involuntary nature of the sacrifice.

'It was a strange wedding,' he said, beginning to find relief in relating his experiences. 'They were married in the room in which I found them, with no attempt at bridal ceremony. Amy was still in her boat-dress, with her head uncovered. She trembled so much that I thought she would



have dropped, and her answers were perfectly inaudible.'

'Poor Amy!' said Helen, while the tears, which she was apt to consider a sign of affectation or weakness flowed freely. 'Did she speak to you, Dennis, and had she any message for us?'

'She came up to me when Lord Alan went into the next room to pay the fees, and took my hand for a moment, as she thanked me hurriedly for what I had done for her. She said something in so low a tone that I could scarcely catch it, about her ivory-bound prayer-book, which you were to give me.'

'The prayer-book you gave to her on one of her birthdays. It is on her toilette-table at our lodgings, and you shall have it when we go in. Eva must wonder now whether we are coming.'

They lingered no longer, and Helen left Dennis alone in the sitting-room, presently

returning with the little prayer-book, which she put silently into his hand. Dennis unclasped the book to turn to the fly-leaf on which, in the happy days of their early acquaintance, he had inscribed Amy's name, and, as he did so, one or two dried flowers fluttered from between the pages.

‘Memorials of the walks we have taken together,’ observed Dennis, and he was more deeply moved when he turned to the last leaf of the book, on which a discoloured spike of flowers was gummed, with the initials D. O. B., and a date inscribed below. ‘Look here; Helen; this is a spike of *habenaria*, the white butterfly orchis, which I picked for her, not five minutes before she told me that all was at an end between us. It is faded and blackened now, like our early love, but the relic proves that its memory still lingered in her heart, and it may be that I should have won her

back if I had been less deeply wounded by her fickleness.'

'That is to say, your lives might have flowed in the same current, if you had been equally shallow-hearted,' said Helen, with characteristic vehemence. 'No, Dennis, it is better as it is—better for you, I mean. Amy has acted basely—I must say it, though she is my own sister—and not only towards you. Poor Eva is cut to the heart.'

Richard Mertoun was equally distressed and shocked by the alteration which he noticed in his daughter when he met her at the Bixley station, two days later. The facts in connection with his niece's elopement had only been reported to him in a mitigated form; and his first feeling was one of relief, since he did not consider himself responsible for Amy's misconduct, and believed that the ill-advised haste with which the marriage had been contracted would convince Eva that his

objections to Lord Alan Rae were well founded. In fact, he supposed that Eva must be more affected by the loss of her cousin's companionship than by that of her possible lover. 'Why, my dear child,' he said, 'you look worse than when you went away. We must drive round by Popham's, and desire him to come up and see you this evening.'

'Oh no, papa,' said Eva earnestly. 'Do not let me be worried about my health, and my appetite, and Dr. Popham's prescriptions. All that I want is, to be let alone.'

Helen had gone on to Allerton by the same train, after promising, not very willingly, to return to Leasowes for a few days, if she found that her mother could spare her. 'Only for a few days,' she stipulated. 'Dennis says that life is made up of failed experiments, and that the only inexcusable thing is to fail in the same way twice. You made a

mistake in adopting Amy as a sister, and you shall not do the same thing over again with me.'

'You have often said that no two sisters have less in common,' said Eva.

'It was said before I knew how widely our paths were to diverge; and, as things are at present, I have no poor lover to forsake nor will my beauty turn the head of a rich one; but it would not be less fickle to abandon my connection with old Benson and the sewing-machine, and to leave our mother to carry on the struggle of life without me. And you need not regret that I have other work to do, Eva, for if I were set up on a pinnacle to be worshipped, you would soon be ashamed of your uncouth idol.'

However that might be, Eva cried very much when Helen gathered together the bulky marine and geological treasures with which the railway carriage was littered, and

disappeared into the booking-office to vindicate her independence by taking a second-class ticket for the remainder of the journey, instead of availing herself of her cousin's intention to pay her way home. This was another trait which pointed the contrast between the two sisters; for Eva found herself continually on the verge of giving offence by her habits of lavish liberality, in which Amy had acquiesced almost as a matter of course. The return to Leasowes seemed doubly cheerless, when Helen was no longer by her side to brace her spirits by wholesome counsel. She was harassed by her father's affectionate solicitude about her health; and the anticipation of Lady Cecilia's appearance to jar her sensitive nerves by her comments on their mutual injuries loomed like a nightmare in the background. Dr. Popham's prescriptions seemed a less evil; and Eva gave way to the lassitude which oppressed her, and

lay in bed for some days, while Misbourne was instructed to deny to visitors any access to her sick room.

Helen had not written to her mother to announce her return; so that she left her goods at the station and walked through the quiet streets of Allerton to their own house, which she found to be still untenanted. She set out at once for Charlton Manor, enjoying the coolness and verdure of the grass-fields, and the quiet beauties of the inland landscape, but subdued, at once by the parting from Eva and by the prospect of witnessing her mother's distress on Amy's account. 'If it should be my lot to be crossed in love,' she said to herself, 'I hope that I shall bear it more bravely than poor Eva. I will take Dennis as my model of fortitude; he is neither crushed nor embittered by his disappointment, and yet no one can say that he is insensible to it.'

It was late in the afternoon when Helen reached the farm, and the elms which surrounded it threw their long shadows across the grass which the sleek cows were munching with practical, if not with æsthetic, enjoyment of its dewy fragrance. While Helen hesitated to startle her mother by walking up the flagged pathway, and entering the house without preamble, her perplexity was relieved by Mr. George Charlton's appearance from behind the farm buildings. He was very unlike his small, brisk sister in person—younger by more years than she would have cared to specify, tall and broad-shouldered, deliberate in speech, and with the somewhat bovine cast of features which is not uncommonly acquired by men whose work lies among the fields and pastures of rural England. He advanced to meet Helen with the broadest smile of congratulation. 'Mrs. Mertoun



will be delighted to see you, and so indeed are we all,' he said. 'We have not been able to talk of anything but your sister's great marriage at home, and it was just the same when I went into the market yesterday. At first Mrs. Mertoun was a little startled and upset by getting no longer notice of it, but young people must manage matters their own way, and the more we think of it the better she is pleased. As my sister Anne says, 'Miss Amy's beauty will grace a coronet, and the Marquis of Raeburn cannot fail to be charmed with his daughter-in-law.'

Helen was relieved, if a little surprised, to find that her mother had been enabled to view the matter through Miss Charlton's spectacles, and she felt no desire to dispel the illusion. Mrs. Mertoun was not in truth quite so free from misgivings as George Charlton represented her to be, and she shed a few tears when she had taken Helen to her

own room, acknowledging that it was very sudden, and that Henry was sadly put out and vexed about it. But, she added, Amy's happiness was the chief thing to be considered, and, if her lover had insisted on secrecy, she must not be too much blamed. There was not much time for private discussion on Helen's first arrival, for Miss Charlton was hovering about, eager to enforce her welcome by making Helen sit down to the substantial evening meal which was already spread. The cream which had been brought in for tea, rich as it was, was not considered rich enough to do her honour; and fresh supplies were ordered from the dairy, together with a golden slice of honeycomb. Helen was quite ready to do justice to these delicacies, and although she felt like a monster of hypocrisy when she was called upon to describe Lord Alan's noble appearance, courtly manners, and ardent affection,

she could abandon herself with the healthy instinct of youth, which disdains to brood over unseen griefs, to the amusement of the moment when the conversation diverged to the wider subject of courtship.

‘It is not much you know about it, George, the more’s the pity,’ said Miss Charlton, who believed herself to be swayed by a heroic desire to abdicate in favour of a young sister-in-law.

‘I got over it early in life,’ replied George, with a grim smile; ‘mother cured me of courting when I was only a lad, and I never tried it again.’

‘You have kept the matter very close all these years,’ rejoined Miss Charlton, ‘I never heard a word of it.’

‘Tell us now,’ said Helen; and though Mr. Charlton coloured and fidgetted, and said that it was nonsense, he did not resist the importunity.

‘I was only a lad,’ he repeated, ‘and very much taken up with Molly Moggs the dairy-maid, who was six years older than me, and had been keeping company with our carter since they went to Sunday-school together, though I knew nought of it. I came into the milking-house one afternoon, and, never thinking that mother was in the next stall, I came behind Moll as she bent over the milking-pail, took up her face in my two hands, and gave her a smacking kiss. Mother turned sharp round to say that Moll was wasting her time, with her face all aflame when she saw that it was I. There was Moll crying behind her apron, and I stood there like a fool not knowing what to do or say. ‘You say that he never served you so before, Moll,’ said mother, ‘and I’ll show you what to do if he ever offers to serve you so again.’ She pulled my head down by the hair and gave me such a box

on the ear as made the sparks fly out of my eyes. I did not think so much of the blow, but it made me mad to see Moll drop her apron and forget her crying, and lay her head against the cow's side to laugh. I locked myself up in my room and would not have any supper, and that night I swung myself out the chamber window into the garden, and ran off, meaning to enlist for a soldier or go to sea. I ran a mile beyond Allerton, and then I remembered that I had gone to the milking-house before I littered down the calves, and that the poor things would be crying for their supper all night.'

'And so you went back to the farm,' said Helen; 'that is a delightful conclusion to the idyll. The calf which revived your wavering allegiance to the Manor Farm ought to have been stuffed and put in a glass case.' The homely talk, the country fare,

were alike refreshing to her harassed spirits, and she was able to take a more cheerful view of Amy's future when they retired for the night, and it was necessary to discuss the matter with Mrs. Mertoun in all its bearings.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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